

EMPERORS AND KHANS:
PROLEGOMENA TO THE GEO-POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE FOUNDING
OF THE TANG DYNASTY

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Preface:

In 689 A.D., Mochuo Khan 默啜可汗, the great khan of the recently rejuvenate Eastern Turkish confederacy (descendent of the Northern Turkish confederacy), sent a marriage request to the female Chinese empire, Wu Zetian 武則天 in the hope that a male member of the Chinese imperial family would marry the great khan's daughter, a princess from the Turkish royal clan. After a brief discussion with her courtiers, Wu Zetian appointed her nephew's son, Wu Yanxiu 武延秀, to be the great khan's son-in-law. Accompanied by other courtiers, who had been hastily appointed as assistances and diplomats, the young man marched to Mochuo's court with lavish gifts and the best wishes of the emperor; because of its military weakness, the empire needed to cultivate friendly relations with the confederacy now more than ever. When Wu Yanxiu arrived Mochuo Khan's court, however, the great khan was disappointed to see that the Chinese son-in-law was a member of the Wu family, not of the Li family. The great khan expressed his anger in a statement about this marriage: For generations, he said, the Turkish people had surrendered to the house of Tang 唐 (founded by the Li Yuan 李淵 in 618 A.D.) and obeyed its orders. How could a member of the Wu family, with a humble and unheard of surname, be sent to marry my daughter? I heard that the bloodline of Li didn't break yet, two male members still alive and I was going to restore their positions. Afterwards, the great khan put Wu Yanxiu into prison and forced one of the Chinese

courtiers who had accompanied the mission to guide the Turkish cavalry in a devastating assault on Chinese troops.

This story was recorded multiple times in Chinese sources¹. The narration itself is replete with biases record-keepers and historians because Wu Zetian's "emperorship" was not universally accepted even by her contemporaries on account of her gender and the way she had "stole" the imperial power from her husband, Li Zhi 李治, the third emperor of Tang. However, the story does point to a number of historical truths. First, Mozhuo did reject Wu Yanxiu as his son-in-law. Second, Tang had successfully incorporated many Northern Turkish chiefs and tribes into the empire, with which Wu Zetian's newly founded Zhou 周 could not compare. And, third, according to Mozhuo's, obedience from the Turkish people gave Tang the authority to marry the great khan's daughter. Since such political marriages between powerful households had been widely practiced and also adopted by Tang and its northern neighbors, the Chinese sources are very likely to be true, or at least close to Mozhuo's original idea.

Inspired by this story, this thesis will start from the following question: how did Tang incorporate the remnants of the Northern Turkish confederacy into the empire? To answer

¹ Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tang Shu* 《舊唐書》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975), vol.6, p.127; vol.194, p.5169; vol.77, p.2679; vol.183, p.4733. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, *Xin Tang Shu* 《新唐書》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975), vol.100, p.3942; vol.205, p.5839; vol.215, p.6045. Du You 杜佑, *Tong Dian* 《通典》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1988), vol.198, p.5435. Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* 《資治通鑑》 (Changsha: Yuelu Shushe, 2010), vol.206, p.442.

this question, I will focus on the reigns of the first Tang emperor, Li Yuan (r. 618 - 626 A.D.), and of his successor, Li Shimin 李世民 (r. 626 – 649 A.D.). The former sustained numerous threats from the confederacy during the early years of the dynasty, while it was the latter who eventually incorporated the Turkish remnants into the empire after the fall of the Northern Turkish confederacy. On the confederate side, I will focus on Shibi Khan 始畢可汗 (r. 609 – 619 A.D.), Chuluo Khan 處羅可汗 (r. 619 – 620 A.D.), and Xieli Khan 頡利可汗 (r. 620 – 630 A.D.) with emphasis on the latter two.

This exploration will be divided into three chapters. Chapter One will focus on the political turmoil in north China after the collapse of Sui dynasty. As only one among many rebel powers in north China, Tang had to come to terms with the fact that the only political core within what we will call the greater East Asian hinterland was the Northern Turkish confederacy. If Tang wanted to transform itself into another political core, it needed to deal with both the military threats from the confederacy and the devastating consequence of the collapse of Sui which itself had been caused both directly and indirectly by the confederacy. As we will see, Tang wasn't able to fully achieve either security or its political goals before the downfall of the confederacy.

In Chapter Two, we shall turn our attention to the confederacy and to identifying the internal

weaknesses that were presented despite the confederacy's hegemony over the East Asian hinterland. The first weakness was the nature of the confederacy's political structure. The Chinese sources indicate that Xieli Khan put his trust in Han-Chinese advisor(s) as well as Sogdian-Iranians at the expense of his own Turkish tribal men in an attempt to increase the personal power of the great khan. This move, however, upset the political traditions of Inner Asian confederations, adversely affected the interests of the other tribes, and provoked widespread dissatisfaction. Of course, this single issue – Xieli Khan's attempt at centralization – could not bring down the confederacy by itself. Under Xieli Khan, the confederacy was still the strongest military existence in East Asia and a mortal threat to the fledgling Tang. A more decisive blow was, in fact, the spate of cold weather which undermined the economic basis of the confederacy and Xieli Khan's power. Finally, the military strength of the confederacy was weakened by the disunity between Xieli Khan and other Ashina elites from the Turkish royal clan, such as Tuli Khan 突利可汗. The downfall of the confederacy may be attributed to these three internal weaknesses; Tang was still the weaker party and had little to do with confederacy's collapse, but it did exploit these weaknesses in its quest to become the dominant power.

Chapter Three will investigate the incorporation within the Tang empire of the confederate defectors. To this end, I will distinguish among the defectors between commoners and elites

and discuss them separately. With respect to the commoners, Tang decided to settle them in Ordos region and allow them to maintain their political customs in exchange for military service to the empire. With respect to the elites, they were incorporated as the military officers of the Tang army. As we shall find discover, the relationship between Li Shimin and his military officers, Chinese or not, was a personal relationship between a superior and a subordinate, unlike the bureaucratic relationship between the emperor and his officials.

Although this thesis will not discuss Li Shimin's Korean campaign, I would argue that it too must be placed in the context of Tang-Turkish relations and the incorporation of Turks into the Chinese empire. Traditionally, historians consider Li Shimin's Korean campaign a waste of resources and a meaningless display of Tang's military power. Even Li Shimin himself acknowledged that he nearly traversed the same failed path as that emperor Yang Guang 楊廣 (Sui Yangdi 隋煬帝). However, research has demonstrated that even Yang Guang's Korean campaigns had multiple strategic purposes². Li Shimin's Korean campaign also deserves a re-examination. For Tang, the major goal of Korean campaign was to occupy, or at least subjugate, Kokuryo 高句麗 (Gaogouli). Even before the Chinese empire had been unified by Sui, Kokuryo's ambition to control the entire Liaodong Peninsula was already obvious. This ambition was probably triggered by a gradually intensifying conflict within the Korean

² Han Sheng 韓昇, "Suichao yu Gaoli Guanxi de Yanbian" <隋朝與高麗的演變>, *Maritime History Studies* 《海交史研究》 (1998), vol.2, pp.8-20.

Peninsula. To achieve its goal required that Kokuryo prevented the unification of the Chinese empire and the formation there of a centralized imperial government. The Turkish confederacy, therefore, was an important and powerful ally of the Koreans, while the Turks had their own interest in working with them. Therefore, if Kokuryo could be controlled, one of the major bases of anti-Chinese power in Northeast Asia would be eliminated; Tang would be able to prevent disloyal or disaffected Turkish elites from forming an alliance with Kokuryo; and the steppe/forest people who lived between Kokuryo and the Tang, like the Khitans and Xis, would be more obedient to Tang and less willing to ally with the Turks. These strategic considerations were already operative in the Sui their importance continued into the Tang. The grand strategy, however, never became functional because once the conquest of Kokuryo was accomplished during the reign of the third emperor of Tang, the Chinese were forced to pull out of the Korean Peninsula to confront a new and more imminent threat: Tibet (or Tubo 吐蕃)³. The campaign did serve to further the incorporation of the remaining Northern Turks, however, even though their confederacy had already collapsed when the campaign was launched. What follows is an attempt to understand Tang-Turkish relations during the reigns of Li Yuan and Li Shimin in terms of the geopolitics of the East Asian heartland. What follows forms part of a larger project to rewrite the history of the struggle to re-found a stable and unified Chinese empire out of the military and ethnic confusion of the Six Dynasties period by

³ Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, *Tangdai Zhengzhishi Luegao* 《唐代政治史略稿》 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2009), pp.237-238.

enlarging our context to include the quest of Turks and Chinese to dominate the East Asian hinterland.

Chapter One: The Birth of Tang within the Turkish Political Core

Before we actually enter the discussion about Tang's strategies of incorporating the North Turkish confederacy into the empire, it is necessary first to acknowledge the political landscape at the fall of the Sui 隋: Tang surely wasn't the only possible or even the most likely successor of the Sui, and during its early years, the regime's safety was always survival was always in doubt.

When emperor Yang Guang was murdered by his trusted subordinate, the inner vulnerabilities of the dynasty finally to the surface: When localism swallowed the whole empire, neither Yang Guang's vast patronage across multiple religions and regions nor his lavish yet highly fashioned lifestyle which that was meant to demonstrate the supreme power of the imperial family to his subjects could save the empire from total collapse. The majority of the core regions of the empire were now took over by local strongmen, bandits or elite of previous Southern Dynasties⁴. Many of them displayed a military sophistication, generosity, and personal charisma guaranteeing the willingness of their followers to die for them during chaotic years⁵. In the north and northwestern borderland, local powers also arose quickly and

⁴ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.53, pp.2207–2226; vol.54, pp.2234–2244; vol.55, pp.2252–2255, p.2260–2262; vol.56, pp.2263–2269, pp.2273–2275.

⁵ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.53, pp.2234–2244; vol.55, pp.2252–2255; vol.56, pp.2266–2269.

gained their independence⁶.

As the rivals within the shattered empire fought each other to death, another political core which settled in the Mongolian steppe, gradually became influential. After Qimin Khan 啟民可汗, one of the leaders of the Northern Turkish confederacy who devoted his loyalty to emperor Yang Jian 楊堅 (Sui Wendi 隋文帝) and gained support from Sui, confederacy began to regain its strength⁷. Throughout the two succeeding khans, so far there are no records about major turmoils nor natural disasters, which may indicate that the confederacy had gained a valuable break. Although *Sui Shu*, *Jiu Tang Shu*, and *Xin Tang Shu* suggest that the confederacy was taking advantages of the turmoil within the Chinese empire⁸, which was obviously true, Shibi Khan, the successor of Qimin Khan, had already demonstrated an ability to challenge the sole authority of the Son of Heaven when he led the cavalry to surround Yang Guang at Yanmen 雁門⁹. Clearly, when the confederacy had passed to the next generation, its strength did not derive from its exploitation of Sui's weakness, and the core of the Turkish confederacy had been established before the Chinese empire descended into chaos.

With the shattered of Sui, The Northern Turkish confederacy made a play to replace China as

⁶ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.55, pp.2245–2247, pp.2248–2251, pp. 2256–2258; vol.56, p.2280–2281.

⁷ Wei Zheng 魏徵, *Sui Shu* 《隋書》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1973), vol.84, pp.1872–1875.

⁸ *Sui Shu*, vol.84, p.1878; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5153; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6028.

⁹ *Sui Shu*, vol.84, p.1876.

the political core of Northeast Asia. With the upper hand on Mongolian steppe and in the politics of north China, the confederacy successfully built up patron-vessel relations with multiple warlords by granting khan titles and wolfs head banners symbolizing the rulers' authorities in Turkish political term¹⁰, and even protected Yang Guang's empress and a male scion of the Sui Royal family, granting him the title "King of Sui"¹¹. Since this "King" had his own court and subjects¹², we can't simply take him as a mere puppet. However, the ambitions of the confederacy were now clear: all personnel of north China, no matter their immediate loyalties, would derive their authority from the confederacy.

Before we begin our discussion about Tang and its position within the changing relation between core and periphery in Northeast Asia, there are two issues require our attention. First of all, although the confederacy granted multiple Turkish titles to many warlords of north China, there is no evidence to suggest that there was a hierarchy of these titles. The only hierarchy, as we've already discussed, existed between the confederacy and the warlords below it. This meant that the confederacy wanted to keep north China in separation¹³. A similar strategy was also used by Sui since a unified power on the steppe would always be a

¹⁰ Wang Zhenping, *Tang China in Multi-Polar Asia: A History of Diplomacy and War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), p.15.

¹¹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, Vol. 194a, p.5154.

¹² *Jiu Tang Shu*, Vol. 194a, p.5154.

¹³ Lin Enxian 林恩顯, "Tujue Dui Sui Tang Liangdai De Fenhua Zhengce" <突厥對隋唐兩代的分化政策>, *Tujue Yanjiu* 《突厥研究》 (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1988), pp.281–283.

threat to the Chinese empire¹⁴. For the confederacy, the purpose of using the strategy can be folded: it can drain resources more easily from north China through looting and extortion¹⁵, and, as some historians suggest, it can prevent the birth of a unified Chinese empire hostile to the Turks¹⁶. The second issue is closely related to the first one: Although many warlords sought for Turkish assistance, the remaining sources suggest that the confederacy seems more interested in connecting warlords from regions which had territorial connections with the confederacy¹⁷. For those who located a farther south, like Wang Shichong 王世充, the ex-Sui courtier and warlord who occupied Luoyang 洛陽, communications indeed existed but were less regular¹⁸. As for those who located in the southern region of Yangzi River, no sources suggest the Turks were even in contact. From this, we can see that the Turks were attempting to carve out of parts of north China an expanded periphery to the core of the steppe. Anyone beyond this periphery was in fact beyond its concern, and the argument that the main goal of the confederacy was to prevent the unification of a Chinese empire is an exaggeration: The confederacy was more interested in keeping a Chinese empire from expanding into the north

¹⁴ "Suitang Liangdai Dui Tujue de Lijian Zhengce" <隋唐兩代對突厥的離間政策>, *Tujue Yanjiu*, p.245.

¹⁵ Lin Enxian, "Tujue Dui Sui Tang Liangdai De Fenhua Zhengce", *Tujue Yanjiu*, pp.285–288.

¹⁶ Lin Enxian, "Tujue Dui Sui Tang Liangdai De Fenhua Zhengce", *Tujue Yanjiu*, p.288.

¹⁷ Lin Enxian, "Tujue Dui Sui Tang Liangdai De Fenhua Zhengce", *Tujue Yanjiu*, p.290.

¹⁸ *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215a, p.6030; *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.188, pp.64-65.

Xin Tang Shu mentions that during the third year of Wude, Wang Shichong's ambassador, Wang Wensu 王文素, encouraged Xieli Khan to support Yang Zhengdao. *Zizhi Tongjian* suggests that during the third year of Wude, the confederacy sent Ashina Jieduo 阿史那揭多 to present horses to Wang Shichong and asked for a marriage. Shichong married a female member from his family to this Turkish nobleman. Within the same year, the confederacy secretly sent ambassador(s) to meet Shichong. The ambassador(s) was discovered and killed by Li Xiyu 李襲譽, a Tang general. It seems that the confederacy and Wang Shichong began their communications at around the third year of Wude, Tang soon discovered the relationship between the two and put an end to it since there are no further evidences to prove that the communications were still there after the Turkish ambassador's death.

Chinese borderlands than in preventing a unified Chinese empire.

What about Tang? When Li Yuan decided to rise up his own flag, he was stationing at Taiyuan 太原, a frontier fort defending against potential Turkish assaults. As an established military commander with experience countering nomadic attacks and trained his cavalry in nomadic style¹⁹, Li Yuan clearly understood his position: He had to build up relation with the Turkish confederacy like other warlords had done²⁰. Previous research suggests that Li Yuan had no choice in this matter, since Taiyuan was within the easy reach of the Turks, he needed to make sure that the great Khan and his followers were satisfied so they would remain on his side when the main troop of Taiyuan was marching into Guanzhong 關中²¹, the capital area of Sui. Scholars suggest that although there was a lack of sources, it's acceptable to believe that Li Yuan was also demanded by the confederacy to receive a wolf head banner (and perhaps, a Turkish title) as an indicator of his vassalship to the Turks²². Interestingly, Li Yuan's second son, Li Shiming, seems to have sworn a blood oath with, and became the brother of a Turkish nobleman. Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 suggests that since the oath was sworn in Turkish way, Li

¹⁹ *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.1, pp.1–21.

²⁰ Li Shutong 李樹桐, "Tang Gaozu Chengchen Yu Tuju Kaobian" 〈唐高祖稱臣於突厥考辨〉, *Tangshi Kaobian* 《唐史考辨》 (Taipei: Taiwan Zhonghua Shuju, 1965), pp.13-18.

²¹ Huang Yuese 黃約瑟, "Luelun Litang Qibing Yu Tujue Guanxi" 〈略論李唐起兵與突厥關係〉, *Shihuo Yuekan* 《食貨月刊》 (1988), vol.16, nos.11 -12, pp.434-445. Howard J. Wechsler, "The Founding of the Tang Dynasty: Kao-tsu (reign 618 - 626)", in *Sui and Tang China 589 – 906*, vol.3, pt.1 of *The Cambridge History of China* (edited by Denis C. Twitchett, pp.150 – 187, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp.181–182.

²² Wang Zhenping, *Tang China in Multi-Polar Asia*, p.17.

Shimin was formally accepted by other Turkish elites as one of them²³. If this was really the case, Li Shimin's Turkish identity would surely give him the authority to replace the great khan and ruled the steppe in the future. Chen's judgment may be an exaggeration, yet his basic idea is compelling: In the very beginning of dynasty building, Tang and its founding family were inextricably linked with the confederacy's ruling class. From a Turkish perspective, as subordinates who received recognition and status in exchange for gifts of protection to the great khan, Li Yuan - and, perhaps, Li Shimin, was well as other warlords - were all included among the rightful competitors for power in north China.

After Li Yuan settled down in Guanzhong, his interests gradually began to conflict with those of the confederacy. As we have discussed before, the confederacy regarded itself as the overlord of the area, which was why it was willing to shelter other defeated warlords²⁴, to appoint their successors²⁵, or have someone killed if he tried to escape from its authority²⁶. However, this Turkish overlordship became the greatest threat to Li Yuan as the new emperor turned to the conquest to the old territory of Sui.

²³ Chen Yinke, "Lun Tanggaozu Chengchen Yu Tuju Shi" 論唐高祖稱臣於突厥事, *Lingnan Journal* 《嶺南學報》 (1951), 11:2, pp.8-9.

²⁴ For example, Liu Heita 劉黑闥 searched for protection from the confederacy after he was defeated by Tang troops (*Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.55, p.2260).

²⁵ For example, Yuan Junzhang 苑君璋 was appointed by the confederacy to lead Liu Wuzhou's 劉武周 troops after Liu's death (*Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.55, p.2255).

²⁶ For example, Liu Wuzhou and Song Jingang 宋金剛 was killed by Turkish cavalry after the confederacy found out that the two tried to run away from Turkish control (*Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.55, p.2254).

With the rivals within modern day Hebei 河北 and Shanxi 山西 were largely put to rest, the vassalship between Tang and the confederacy went completely sour. During the reign of Li Yuan, Turkish cavalry harassed the new-born empire almost every year²⁷, sometimes with help from independent borderland warlords, at other times with Tang rivals who had fled Tang's persecution. The scale of, and harm inflicted by these operations are impossible to estimate due to the lack of statistics and detailed descriptions, but we do know that in many cases Tang troops absorbed these attacks rather passively and that operations by Tang troops in response were few²⁸.

The seriousness of Turkish assaults can also be proved by one court discussion between Li Yuan, his elder sons, and his most trust worthies²⁹. In the seventh year of Wude 武德七年, as multiple sources suggest, advisors estimated that if Li Yuan could burn down the current capital and move the capital away from Chang'an 長安 to somewhere south of Mount Zhongnan 終南山, the direct threat to the empire would diminish, that the wealth of Chang'an was a temptation. Li Yuan actually accepted the advice and sent a commissioner to secure possible locations for the new capital. We don't know which spot suited Li Yuan, perhaps

²⁷ *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6031 and vol.1, pp.11-19; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.1, pp.13-15. Base on the dates in *Xin Tang Shu* and *Jiu Tang Shu*, we know that the relationship between Tang and the confederacy went sour at around the third year of Wude. After that, invasions occurred every year, sometimes twice a year. Most of the invasions occurred between June and August. The last invasion occurred in the ninth year of Wude, right after Li Shimin's succession.

²⁸ *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.1, pp.11-19; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.1, pp.13-15.

²⁹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.2, p.29; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6031; *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.191, p.117.

because the idea was finally abandoned, but we won't be surprised if Li Yuan wanted to move to Fancheng 樊城 (modern day Hubei Fanxiang shi 湖北樊襄市)³⁰. Fancheng had its geographic advantage: It located just beside Han River 漢水 and could connect with Hanzhong 漢中 through the waterway. Hanzhong was an agriculture-productive region protected by mountains and was less damaged during the turmoil at the end of Sui, which could nourish the new capital with its wealth. Fancheng was also fairly close to Luoyang, a strategic position for Sui (and later, Tang) to access to the southeast region of the empire. Yet Luoyang itself was not suitable to be the new capital at this moment due to the destruction brought by the bloody war between Wang Shichong and Li Shimin. During the debate, crown prince Li Jiancheng 李建成 and his younger brother Li Yuanji 李元吉 both supported Li Yuan's decision, high officials like Xiao Yu 蕭瑀, who thought it was infeasible, did not oppose it openly. Only Li Shimin argued that the empire should stand its ground at Chang'an, summon its troops, march into the steppe and fight. Afterward, he was criticized by his brothers as foolhardy. Of course, Li Shimin would later be portrayed by the official historians as hero and man with guts in contrast to his cowardly father and brothers. But since Li Yuan himself had a much longer military career than his sons, not to mention his experience in dealing with the confederacy, it seems more reasonable to believe that Li Shimin was actually the ignorant one.

³⁰ While *Jiu Tang Shu* only gives us an ambiguous location: the south of Mt Zhongnan, *Xin Tang Shu* and *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* tell us more: Fan (Fangcheng) and Deng (Dengzhou 鄧州, modern day Henan Dengzhou Shi 河南鄧州市) was two of the possible locations for the commissioner to investigate.

Aside from direct military assaults and supporting rivals to devastate Tang's local rule, the Turkish hegemony also generated other related threats which Tang needed to face at the same time. One of these was the decrease in the population within the Chinese empire. Studies already suggest that after the great turmoil, the taxed, or taxable, population inherited by Tang was much lesser than that of Yang Jian's reign³¹, and didn't fully recover until the era of Li Zhi 李治 (Tang Gaozong 唐高宗) and Wu Zetian³². The decrease of taxed population alone surely can not prove the decrease of general population since the former may only reflect the empire's loss of control over its people instead of actual mortality, therefore the decrease in the general population shouldn't be overly exaggerated³³. However, the need for analyzing the influence of the confederacy requires us to go farther. Factors causing the decrease of the general population can be multiple: Yang Guang's Korean campaigns can surely be counted as one of the factors since these all ended with total failure and many Sui troops paid their lives³⁴. Aside from the campaign itself, many life-costly preparatory works took place in modern day Shandong 山東, where local populations also suffered from flood and food shortage³⁵. As for Hebei, since it was the major gathering location of all of Sui army, the local population was mobilized to construct channel for transportation. It was said that since men were far from

³¹ David A. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300 – 900* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p.183; Tang Changru 唐長儒, *Weijin Nanbeichao Suitangshi Sanlun* 《魏晉南北朝隋唐史三論》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2011), p.228.

³² Tang Changru, *Weijin Nanbeichao Suitangshi Sanlun*, pp.230 – 231.

³³ Dewin G. Pulleyblank, "Registration of Population in China in the Sui and Tang Periods", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (1961), vol.4, pp.289–301.

³⁴ *Sui Shu*, vol.4, pp.82–83; *Zi zhi Tong Jian*, vol.181, pp.992–993.

³⁵ *Sui Shu*, vol.3, p.76; *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.181, pp.989–990.

enough to finish the work, women also joined the labor force³⁶. The subsequent era of turmoil was another factors. Both modern day Henan 河南, Hebei and the southern region of Yangzi River were major battlefields³⁷. As we've already seen, Li Yuan and his sons had a difficult time with their rivals Hebei and their seesaw battles were brutal. Still, another factor which is often neglected was the fact that many Han-Chinese, either been kidnaped by Turkish raiders or escaped to the confederacy in order to get away from the chaos, was under Turkish rule.

Because of our lack of sources, the origins of the population under Turkish rule is unknown, but we may fruitfully speculate based on a set of deductions. Although Tang rivals were many, large-scale war was not an empire-wide phenomenon. Guanzhong, for example, was relatively undamaged during the warlords period; it remained under Sui control and subject to a speedy settlement under Li Yuan. Compare with other regions, the population in Guanzhong was relatively larger and, base on previous research, some farmers even couldn't find sufficient farmland due to the density of population³⁸. Besides Guanzhong, Hanzhong, Sichuan 四川³⁹ and at least part of Hubei 湖北 may also quite flourish, since no source suggests the presence of powerful warlords in that region or the occurrence of large-scale battles. Also, since Li Yuan considered moving the capital to the south of Mount Zhongnan, which Fancheng was almost

³⁶ *Sui Shu*, vol.3, p.70; *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, Vol.181, p.980.

³⁷ Tang Changru, *Weijin Nanbeichao Suitangshi Sanlun*, pp.230–231. Tang also considers that the situation of the southern regions of Yangzi River was relatively better than that of Henan and Hebei.

³⁸ Tang Changru, *Weijin Nanbeichao Suitangshi Sanlun*, p.231.

³⁹ Tang Changru, *Weijin Nanbeichao Suitangshi Sanlun*, pp.231–232.

surely within consideration, the preferred location and its surrounding areas should be relatively undamaged due to the fact that rebuilding a capital from scratch and destruction can be very costly, and the administrative costs of running the central bureaucratic system was not cheap. In the absence of large-scale destruction or warfare, we may assume, the motivation for flight or emigration would have been removed. Although natural disasters, famine or a lack of land can also motivate immigration, the extant sources are also silent.

As we've already mentioned, modern day Hebei, Henan and the southern region of Yangzi River endured severe damage during the turmoil era so these areas can be considered as regions crawl with *sangluan* 喪亂, a particular term to describe the chaos that frequently used by the authors of the sources we can access. Although we can't deny the possibility that some population might begin their journey from the southern region and went into Turkish realm, it seems more likely that the majority of the immigrants and the victims who were kidnapped by Turkish raiders came from regions like Hebei and Shanxi which were close to the confederacy and its influences.

Apart from the origins of the refugees, we also do not know is their number, and when sources discuss the matter, the word "many" is always used⁴⁰. However, references to the total

⁴⁰ For example: *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6028; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5153.

amount are more frequent than references to origins. As we've mentioned before, Yang Zhengdao 楊政道, a Sui royal family member, was protected by the confederacy. Sources suggest that the Turk allowed him to govern the Han-Chinese who lived within the confederacy and he subsequently had ten-thousand subjects under his command⁴¹. Obviously, we're not sure about the sex ratio of these ten-thousand subjects, nor do we know that this ten-thousand subjects comprised the total number refugees within the confederacy. However, other sources suggest that the total population of Han-Chinese refugees maybe much more than ten-thousands. At the end of third year of Zhenguan (629 A.D.), the Bureau of Households 戶部 claimed that up to that moment, the total population of Han-Chinese who had returned from the confederacy to the empire's control, including the Turks who had surrendered to Tang and other barbarians who were under the control of county – prefecture system was about one million and two hundred thousand⁴². Within this massive crowd of people, due to the lack of knowledge of the total amount of non-Han population, our calculation of the total amount of Han-Chinese is hardly precise. However, we are sure that these returned Han-Chinese were only those who were willing or capable to return, since sources also suggest that at the fifth year of Zhenguan (631 A.D.), commissioner(s) sent out

⁴¹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5154; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.140, p.6029.

⁴² *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.2, p.37; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.2, p.31; *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.193, p.165; *Tong Dian*, vol.200, p.5494. The discussions about this issue within these four sources are different. *Jiu Tang Shu* and *Tong Dian* mention about "Turkish people" and "other barbarians" at the same time, while *Xin Tang Shu* and *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* only mention about "other barbarians".

by Li Shimin brought back another eighty thousand Han-Chinese⁴³.

Though we're still not certain about the total number of Chinese refugees, it is clear that Yang Zhengdao's ten thousand subjects were the tip of the iceberg and the actual total was large enough for Tang to take it seriously. During the entire era of Li Yuan's reign (and the very early period of Li Shimin)⁴⁴, the emperor kept on asking the confederacy to return those Han-Chinese population and, if we compare the context of these demands to the context of the demands made by Mochuo Khan 默啜可汗 to Wu Zetian about seventy years later⁴⁵, they are strikingly similar. In Mochuo's case, Wu Zetian did finally return the Turkish population back to the second confederacy since she badly needed Turkish troops to suppress Khitan's uprising, against whose troops the Chinese troops were no match. In Li Yuan's cases, however, we are not clear whether the confederacy was willing to return the refugees, but we do know the return of massive Chinese population seems to have occurred only after the confederacy began to fall apart.

Losing or gaining population, for both nomads and sedentary regimes, can generate multiple effects, the most important of which was the productivity and taxable income of the regime.

⁴³ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.193, p.176; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.2, p.32; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.3, p.41; Wang Qinruo 王欽若, *Ce Fu Yuan Gui* 《冊府元龜》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1960), vol.42, p.477.

⁴⁴ For example, during the ninth year of Wude, Li Shimin asked the confederacy to return the Han-Chinese population (*Zizhi Tongjian*, vol.192, p.137).

⁴⁵ *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6045; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, pp.5168–5169.

As discussed, many refugees may come from modern day Hebei, which was one of the major crops-growing areas in north China⁴⁶. With a large-scale decrease in the general population, it's hard to imagine that regime could muster the strength to fight off its enemy. In fact, even after the fall of the confederacy and the return of some Han-Chinese population, the situation was still regarded as "registered households was not yet recovered and the granaries were not yet fully filled"⁴⁷. The one who made such claim, Wei Zheng 魏徵, was trying to convince Li Shimin not to practice the Fengshan ritual, since the journey would require the provision of resources and labor which the empire was not able to afford. Of course, practicing Fengshan ritual was always an expensive undertaking, and might raise objections even during an age of peace and prosperity, and Wei Zheng was always a moralist (at least in public) who paid particular attention to Li Shimin's self-indulgence; he may have been motivated to exaggerate the general poverty of the empire. However, his argument is somewhat trustworthy base on our previous discussions about population outflow.

The lack of productivity of the new empire may also be observed in grain price. The sources suggest that at the very beginning of Zhenguan era, one *dou* 斗 of grain cost one *pi* 匹 of silk since the taxed population under government control was less than three million households⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ Tang Changru, *Weijin Nanbeichao Suitangshi Sanlun*, p.322.

⁴⁷ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.194, p.180.

⁴⁸ *Tong Dian*, vol.7, p.148; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.51, p.1344.

We don't know how many *pi* of silk should be paid for one *dou* of grain during Wude era, but it was highly unlikely for the exchange would have been lower than that of Zhenguan's. Also, we are not sure whether the exchange rate between grain and silk was regarded by contemporaries as unbearable, since the voice of commoners, who were directly affected by the price of grain, is unknown. Fortunately, one remaining source suggests that grain price became cheaper in the fourth year of Zhenguan. The author(s) of the source actually praised Li Yuan and Li Shimin for their hard work, which may indicate that their efforts did make lives of the commoners somewhat easier⁴⁹. Interestingly enough, we should notice that the year in which the grain price began to go down was very close the year that the massive amount of population returned to the empire's control (the third year of Zhenguan) and the confederacy began to fall apart. It seems somewhat unlikely that the price decrease was directly due to the return of this population, since resettling them and put them to work would have required some time. Nonetheless, the exact months/seasons of their return and the price decrease is left ambiguous in the sources, so there may be, in fact, a connection between the two events.

Overall, from the previous discussion, we can see that Tang was born within the political sphere which the Turkish confederacy formed the core. The confederacy deployed its influence both directly and indirectly on Tang, placing great stress on Li Yuan's ability to govern

⁴⁹ *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.51, p.1344.

and rejuvenate the Chinese empire. In fact, both Li Yuan and Li Shimin openly expressed their relieve and happiness after the collapsed of the confederacy⁵⁰, which indicated the seriousness of the threat which the confederacy posed. Li Yuan even held a private banquet and invited his relatives, trusted companions, and Li Shimin in celebration⁵¹. Li Shimin barely saw his father after the Coup at Xuanwu Gate 玄武門之變, furious over the succession⁵², yet he showed up for Li Yuan's private banquet and the two are reported to have enjoyed themselves, evidence that the "Turkish problem" affected both equally.

Up to this point, a question may arise in our minds: If Tang was much weaker than the confederacy in the very beginning of its establishment, how could it overcome its inferior position and gain recognitions from at least some of the Turkish elites? Convention narrations tend to treat Western Han and Tang similarly as two dynasties that extended their authorities and power into the steppe. However, there were differences between the two. One of the major differences was that when Liu Che 劉徹 (emperor Wudi of Western Han 漢武帝) dragged the whole empire into the war against Xiongnu 匈奴, he had inherited enormous resources from his forebears. Li Yuan, Li Shimin and Tang dynasty, however, did not have such

⁵⁰ Song Minguo 宋敏求, *Tang Da Zhaoling Ji* 《唐大詔令集》 (Beijing: Shanwu Yinshuguan, 1959), vol.83, p.477; *Ce Fu Yuan Gui*, vol.84, p.987; Wang Yinglin 王應麟, *Yu Hai* 《玉海》 (Nanjing: Jiangsu Guji Chubanshe, 1988), vol.163, p.3002.

⁵¹ *Zizhi Tongjian*, vol.193, p.168.

⁵² Li Shutong, "Xuanwumenzhibian Jiqi Dui Zhengzhi de Yingxiang" 〈玄武門之變及其對政治的影響〉, *Tangshi Kaobian*, pp.154-191.

good fortune, and their huge disadvantages would lead the Tang government on a unique course incomparable with the Han.

Chapter Two: Tang and the Collapse of the Turkish Confederacy

In the previous chapter, we have seen that when the Northern Turkish confederacy was in its heyday, the Tang empire lacked the strength to defend itself. Indeed, Tang troops did sometimes repel Turkish attacks successfully, yet they were not capable of pursuing their victory deep into the confederacy. It would be justified to say that the newborn Tang was a profitable prey for the Turks, a place where they could arrive fully armed and leave with human captives and imperial bribes. In fact, when Li Shimin gave a public speech to some new recruits of the Tang garrison forces, encouraging them to train hard so that the people might again live in peace⁵³, he was not merely showing his concern about the livelihood of commoners in the typical voice of a Confucian monarch, but also his distress concerning Tang's relations with the confederacy that the young emperor had inherited from his predecessor. Yet, although Tang was surely at a competitive disadvantage, the confederacy also wasn't without its weaknesses. As we shall discuss below, Tang was able to capitalize on these weaknesses and achieve its goal without subjecting the empire to large-scale and long-term military actions.

According to Li Feng's study, Guanzhong has its geographical advantage and disadvantage as

⁵³ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.192, p.137.

the power base of any regime. With its political center in Chang'an, Guanzhong was protected from invasion from the east, but since there were no major natural barriers on its western and northwestern sides, an invasion from either of these directions could be launched relatively easily⁵⁴. Unfortunate for Tang, the three most powerful warlords to the west and northwest of Guanzhong - Xue Ju 薛舉, Li Gui 李軌, and Liang Shidu 梁師都 - all had connections with the confederacy. Both Xue Ju and Li Gui was defeated during the early years of Li Yuan's reign, which certainly relieved some of the burdens on the fledgling regime. Only Liang Shidu managed to hold out until he was assassinated by his cousin, who finally surrendered to Tang and ended the conflict. Due to his uniqueness, Liang Shidu's "career" and, more importantly, his relations with the confederacy must be briefly examined.

According to his biographies in *Jiu Tang Shu* and *Xin Tang Shu*, Liang Shidu came from a locally family of Shuofang county 朔方郡 which had flourished for generations. During Yang Guang's reign, he joined the Sui garrison army and serve as a mid-level officer in his hometown⁵⁵. We know that before Yang Guang started his Korean campaign, he greatly expanded the quota of recruits⁵⁶. Warlords such as Liu Wuzhou and Dou Jiande had all joined up at this time and gained their formidable military experiences during the campaign⁵⁷. Since we don't know

⁵⁴ Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou 1045-771 BC* (Cambridge University Press: 2006), pp.3-4.

⁵⁵ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.56, p.2280; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.87, p.3730.

⁵⁶ *Sui Shu*, vol.24, p.686.

⁵⁷ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.55, p.2252; vol.54, p.2234. *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.86, p.3711; vol.85, p.3696.

when Liang Shidu joined the garrison army, nor did his biographies mention anything about his military career after he joined, we cannot determine whether he had also played a part in the Korean campaign. Yet since it was clear that he came from a typical border elite family, he probably had had some basic military skills before he joined the army, and his promotion as a mid-level officer may also relate to his local influences and knowledge of the borderland.

At the thirteen years of Daye (618 A.D.), Liang Shidu gathered his gang and seized control of Shuofang county. After that, he proclaimed himself as “Grand Chancellor” (*dachengxiang* 大丞相) and allied with the confederacy. In the same year, he proclaimed himself emperor of Liang 梁. Shibi khan, the great khan of the confederacy, sent him a wolf’s-head banner and granted him multiple titles. We should not be surprised to find Turkish titles among them. However, the title that interested us is *Jieshi Tianzi* 解事天子, which means “Son of Heaven who Deals with Affairs” or “Son of Heaven who Understands Affairs”. Although this title has a clear Chinese component (ie. Son of Heaven), we never see the other component or this combination of components in a Chinese context which may indicate that the title was a Turkish idea. Interestingly, among all the warlords, Shidu was the only one who not only received Turkish titles and wolf’s-head banner from the confederacy but also a title with the Sinic component which, as we shall see, indicates a closer relation between Liang and the great khan in comparison with the latter’s relations with the other warlords.

Since the newly built Liang regime was located on the northwest side of Guanzhong, a conflict between Liang and Tang became inevitable. Unlike some of the other warlords, however, there was no evidence to suggest that Liang Shidu had empire-wide ambitions. After he helped the confederacy to take over the control of “the southern side of the river bank” (*henandi* 河南地) and attacked Yanchuan county 鹽川郡, there were no records that attribute further large-scale aggressive operations to Liang⁵⁸. His diffidence was not unique since the other Liang 涼 regime built by Li Gui similarly avoided further expansion once his regime became relatively secure. Li Gui’s biographies in *Jiu Tang Shu* and *Xin Tang Shu* suggest that he had a similar family background as Liang Shidu while also proclaiming himself emperor. During a discussion between Li Gui and his courtiers about whether he should abandon his imperial title and submit to Tang, at least one courtier suggested that since both Tang and Liang were independent states, Li Gui should leave Guanzhong to the Tang and even if Liang submitted to the Tang, it should retain the imperial title. Li Gui agreed with this courtier’s suggestion, and so, when he wrote to Li Yuan, he employed the words “Gui, your younger brother and subject, the emperor of the Great Liang” as his signature⁵⁹. And like Liang Shidu, Li Gui built up connections with the confederacy to secure his position.

In addition to this conservative character of both regimes, there was also another similarity

⁵⁸ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.56, p.2280; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.87, p.3730.

⁵⁹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.55, p.2250; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.86, p.3709.

between the two. Although the military forces of both sides were sufficient for establishing their regimes, they appear significantly less powerful when they encountered Tang troops. This may be because of their lack of enthusiasm for expansion into Guanzhong and may reflect the fact that in most of the time, it was Tang that initiated hostilities. But it may also have something to do with the complexity of the borderland since the rulers were not the only players on the military or political board. Sources suggest that both generals and commoners often turned their back on their original rulers and submitted themselves to Tang when their own fortunes were in jeopardy⁶⁰. One typical example was the betrayal of Li Gui by his own Sogdian forces, whose leader had a personal connection with Chang'an. The turnabout was key to the downfall of Li Gui's Liang; after Tang took over the region, the Sogdian leader and his relative in Chang'an were both been generously rewarded⁶¹.

As for Liang Shidu, his fate was no better than Li Gui's; his subjects also betrayed him at the moment when they were most needed. Nonetheless, he held on for nine years longer than Li Gui had, which indicates that he may have had some advantages. As we have mentioned, Liang Shidu enjoyed a close relation with the confederacy, especially with the great khan. In the sixth year of Wude (623 A.D.), after suffering a severe defeat at the hands of Tang troops and the defection of his two generals along with their soldiers and territory, Liang Shidu asked for

⁶⁰ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.56, p.2281; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.87, p.3731.

⁶¹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.55, pp.2251-2252; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.86, pp.3710-3711.

help and Xieli Khan came to the rescue. From Western Han dynasty, Shuofang county had functioned as the strategic points in the northwest defense of Guanzhong, but because it lacked major geographical barriers, it served as a springboard for both the nomadic and sedentary powers⁶². With Liang Shidu's help, the confederacy could easily enter Tang territory. We may assume - although the sources do not speak about this – that the confederacy could pull back their cavalry without much effort if Tang troops gained the upper hand since the gatekeeper of Guanzhong was on the Turkish side. Then the situation described in the previous chapter would take shape: Tang could hold off the attack, but could not gain any ground. Turkish aid relieved the pressure on Liang Shidu, and after the sixth year of Wude (623 A.D.), there were no major attacks on Shuofang from Tang, and Tang had to deal with increasingly severe and more frequent Turkish assaults.

We can see that Liang Shidu possessed neither an imperial-wide ambition nor solid military or political power. His “independence” largely depended on Turkish recognition and military support. Taking Liang Shidu as their gateway to the south, Turkish troops, once resupplied, might then easily launch their assaults from Shuofang. And if the Turks managed to defend this portal, Tang's success in the steppe would always be in doubt. In the second year of Zhenguan (628 A.D.), Li Shiming tried to persuade Liang Shidu to surrender, taking advantage

⁶² Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580-800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.48.

of inner turmoil in the confederacy. But Liang Shidu turned down the emperor's offer, putting his faith again in Turkish support⁶³. Of course, as we've mentioned, the result was not a happy one for Liang Shidu, and although both he and Li Shimin were familiar with Turkish affairs, the latter better appreciated the vulnerabilities at the heart of the structure of power of the Turkish confederates.

Although the confederacy was in its heyday, the regime under the rule of Xieli Khan was not without problems. Extant Chinese sources suggest that the solidity of Xieli Khan's rule was being undermined by his preference for non-Turkish personnel (i.e. Sogdian-Iranians and Han-Chinese) which alienated his fellow tribesmen. His people were unhappy and there was talk of disloyalty⁶⁴. Our sources lack detail, yet they point out a key weakness of the confederacy which Tang had nothing to do with. Scholars have long known that Inner Asian empires had their political tradition distinctive from the Chinese. Although the rulers all came from noble clans, neither the ruler nor his clan could act as the absolute authority on the steppe. A ruler's power depended on support from other tribal leaders and commoners whose aid and subordination was conditional⁶⁵. In Xieli Khan's case, he certainly had the power to appoint non-Turkish personnel to be his "courtiers", yet doing so violated the interests and

⁶³ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.56, p.2281; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.87, p.3731.

⁶⁴ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.192, pp.145-146; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5159; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6034.

⁶⁵ Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.221.

expectations of the tribes' interests was surely unwise.

We don't know exactly what positions or responsibilities Xieli Khan granted to his non-Turkish personnel, nor the nature of their power, but we may gain some appreciation for the politics by looking at Zhao Deyan 趙德言, a Han-Chinese Sui official who had gained the trust of Xieli Khan and acted as the great khan's major advisor. Importantly, *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* mentions that before Zhao Deyan had joined the confederacy, the customary politics of the Turks had been modest and operating smoothly. This observation fits nicely with what previous studies of the politics of Inner Asian empires have revealed, which is that all important positions were inherited and monopolized by certain lineages⁶⁶. After Zhao gained an opportunity to "wield his own power/authority" (*zhuanqiweifú* 專其威福), he changed many of the old political customs and disturbed the people. How did Zhao gain his opportunity and power? Since *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* was written by Sima Guang as a history textbook for Song emperors, he adopted the moral vocabulary of orthodox historical narration, which precluded the assignment of blame to the sovereign, whether emperor or khan. Sima Guang can only focus on Zhao Deyan's "selfishness" for the destruction of the regime. Yet while Zhao may have won some respect and support from Turkish tribesmen by his personal charisma, a key feature of leadership in Inner Asian societies, Zhao's status as an outsider without connections to a noble Turkish

⁶⁶ Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, p.178.

lineage or chief suggests that his position of authority derived entirely from Xieli Khan, and his activities represented the will of the sovereign. Moreover, if we take into consideration Xieli's documented mistrust toward other Turks (i.e. Turkish elites) and his inclusion of Sogdian-Iranians in his personal retinue, we must conclude that Xieli Khan was attempting to overcome the traditional Turkish constraints on the authority of the sovereign and centralize his power. As we know, he failed.

In addition to the decentralized nature of power in Inner Asian confederations, the economic foundations of this power, pastoralism, was highly vulnerable to natural disasters on the steppe⁶⁷. Extensive drought or heavy snow could devastate the livestock. As we have mentioned in the first chapter, there are no signs of natural disasters during the supremacy of Chuluo khan and Shibi khan. Xieli Khan inherited the position from two of his predecessors, but not their good luck. Sources suggest that heavy snow fell between approximately the eighth year of Wude and the first year of Zhenguan (625 – 627 A.D.), causing large numbers of animal casualties and people suffered from hunger and freeze⁶⁸. And we can regard this period as the beginning of the decline of both the confederacy and the power of the great khan. Still, we must acknowledge that Xieli Khan was still able to mobilize a huge army of

⁶⁷ Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads of the Outside World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.69-84.

⁶⁸ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.192, pp.145-146; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5159; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6034.

cavalry and “travel” all the way to Chang’an soon after Li Shiming’s succession, though the young emperor described these troops as undisciplined, impetuous, lacking the will to fight, and only caring about soliciting bribes⁶⁹. Even Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌, the elder brother of the empress and one of the emperor’s trusted lieutenants, opposed the new emperor’s proposal to attack the confederacy when answering Li Shimin’s inquisition. Referencing Confucian ideals, Wuji stated that since the empire had re-established a truce treaty with the Turks after the invasion of the ninth year of Wude (626 A.D.) and have never attacked by them since, it would be an act of betrayal, not to mention a waste of resources, for the Son of Heaven to send out his troops without having been invaded first, as well as a pointless burden paced on the shoulders of his people, contravening the “Way of Kings”. Therefore, although Li Shimin felt strongly that this was his chance to deal a final blow to the great khan and his evidently weakened and undisciplined cavalry, he acceded to Wuji’s advice⁷⁰. In this case, considering that Xieli Khan has just displayed his power under the city wall of Chang’an, Zhangsun Wuji’s moral objections and Li Shimin’s humble reaction to his courtier’s advice seem to be the ideological expression of a decision that was based on strategic considerations.

The cold weather also had more indirect, but equally negative, effects. According to Nicola Di Cosmo’s brilliant study of the organization of Inner Asian empires, he concludes that it would

⁶⁹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5158.

⁷⁰ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.192, 146.

have been tremendously expensive for the great khan to maintain his cavalry forces at full capacity, since it would have required able-bodied male to devote less of their time on their livelihoods and more to fighting, resulting in a general decrease of production. To make up for this decrease, the great khan would have been desperately in need of money or commodities⁷¹. As we mentioned, bribery and looting were the preferred methods of the confederacy, and the desperate need for resources may account for the indiscipline and chaos of Xieli's troops recognized by Li Shimin. The cold weather, in fact, had made everyone on the steppe short of resources, and Xieli was forced to extract resources from other tribes, which were also in bad shape. Taxation increased, generating hatred and discord. And since the Xieli's forces were culled from multiple tribes, discord led directly to the weakening of his military power⁷². And with the cohesion and strength of the great khan's power now in doubt, other political powers subordinated to the confederacy began to challenge Xieli's authority. Xue-Yantuo 薛延陀 was one of these. As sources and other scholarship suggest⁷³, since Xue-Yantuo located at the north of Gobi Desert, their uprising against the confederacy blocked Xieli's leeway so he couldn't flee to the north if danger accrued. Tang formed an alliance with Xue-Yantuo in the second year of Zhenguan (628A.D.)⁷⁴, thereby encircling the confederacy.

⁷¹ Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, pp.182-183.

⁷² *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.192, 146.

⁷³ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5158-5159; *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.192, p.151; Wang Zhengping, *Tang China in Multi-Polar Asia*, p.33.

⁷⁴ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.193, pp.161-162.

Aside from the economic weakness of the confederacy in these years, the conflict between male members of the ruling clan also weakened its solidarity and strength. As sources clearly show, Xieli Khan was the younger brother of Chuluo Khan, who had inherited the position of great khan from his elder brother, Shibi Khan⁷⁵. Following his succession, Xieli appointed Shibi's son, Ashina shebobi 阿史那什鉢苾, as Tuli Khan. Being a lesser khan, Tuli was charged with controlling the Khitan (or Qidan 契丹), Xi 奚, Mohe 靺鞨 and other steppe/forest people of Northeast Asia. His personal headquarter was located in the east of the confederacy, which was close to Tang's Youzhou 幽州. Although the military power of Khitan and Xi in this period is unknown, we do know from descriptions of the battles between Zhou and Khitan troops during Wu Zetian's reign that the Khitans were very skillful warriors⁷⁶. The appointment of Tuli, therefore, was significant, holding out the promise of potential alliances and troops.

All this came to a head when the Turks prepared to launch a massive invasion in the seventh year of Wude (624 A.D.). To defend itself, the court compelled Li Shimin to lead an expedition force. Records indicate that heavy rain blocked the roads, preventing the transportation of supplies, that the soldiers became tired and afraid, and that their weapons and equipment were in bad shape, causing anxiety in the court and in the field. Li Shimin, in full battle dress,

⁷⁵ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5155.

⁷⁶ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.205, pp.427-431; vol.206, pp.433-452.

was forced to negotiate personally with the two khans in order to prevent a likely defeat⁷⁷. During the conference, Li Shimin tried to provoke a conflict between the two khans by claiming that since Tuli Khan had already negotiated with Tang before the invasion, he was betraying the Tang by joining his uncle. We don't know whether Li Shimin's words are credible, but after hearing the emperor's charges, Xieli Khan is recorded to have been very worried after hearing such an accusation and began to be suspicious about his nephew's motivation. Afterward, Li Shimin sent his subordinates to convince Tuli Khan not to attack. The latter was pleased and, when his uncle proposed an attack, he declined. We can see that Tuli Khan retained significant autonomy in negotiating with other powers even when that negotiation upset the strategy of the great khan. Conflicts within the ruling elites, like this one, was another characteristic of Inner Asian polities. The great khan could not force, nor did he have the authority to compel, his subordinates to present a united front in diplomatic negotiations⁷⁸.

According to *Jiu Tang Shu*, after this unsuccessful invasion, the conflict between Xieli Khan and Tuli Khan gradually intensified. In the second year of Zhenguan (628 A.D.), Tuli Khan invited Tang to attack Xieli Khan because of conflicts with his uncle, although it seems that Li Shimin didn't respond to this offer. In the third year of Zhenguan (629 A.D.), Tuli Khan, along with his

⁷⁷ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.191, pp.119-120.

⁷⁸ Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies*, pp.217-222.

tribe, defected to Tang. This happened before Tang launched the assault on Xieli Khan⁷⁹. If Xieli Khan had his nephew on his side, the outcome of the battle would be hard to predict. Or, perhaps, in the face of this alliance, Tang would not have risked an expeditionary force at all.

Tuli Khan was not the only member of Ashina clan who had the potential to have conflicts with Xieli Khan. Ashina Momo 阿史那摸末, probably one of Xieli Khan's closest relatives who was given the position of "She" 射 with the authority to command troops, abandoned Xieli Khan with his troops and subjects approximately in the first or the second year of Zhenguan (627 – 628 A.D.). A Tang general plotted to exploit the tension between the two. Xieli Khan sent out his men to attack Momo⁸⁰. With the great khan's troops in his front and Tang's troops at his back, Momo had no choice but to surrender himself and his subjects to the Tang⁸¹. Similarly, another Turkish nobleman, Ashina She'er 阿史那社尔, left Xieli Khan and returned to his tribe after the great khan refused to take his advice not to attack other tribes⁸². She'er later became one of Li Shimin's most trusted generals, and his military talent and the loyalty to the Son of Heaven was widely praised⁸³.

⁷⁹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, pp.5158-5159.

⁸⁰ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.69, p.2524.

⁸¹ Edited by Wu Gang 吳鋼, "Ashina Momo Muzhiming" 〈阿史那摸末墓誌銘〉, *Quan Tang Wen Buyi* 《全唐文補遺》 (Xi'an: Sanqin Chubanshe, 1996), vol.3, p.345.

⁸² *Ce Fu Yuan Gui*, vol.926, p.11325; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.110, p.4114.

⁸³ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.109, pp.3289-3290; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.110, pp.4115-4116.

In the long run, the secession of Turkish nobles from the Ashina clan weakened the great khan's power. When Tang general Zhang Gongjin 張公謹 argued that the confederacy was easily defeated, he pointed to the disunity among Ashina elites and the ignorance of Xieli Khan as two of the most important reasons⁸⁴. However, Xieli Khan might have his own story to tell. According to Thomas J. Barfield, the Turks, unlike the Xiongnu state after Modu's 冒頓 rule, lacked stable rules of succession. Every male heir of the great khans preserved the right to fight for the highest position⁸⁵. We may, therefore, better appreciate the difficulty faced by Xieli Khan: the stability of his position required the support of his closest relatives, yet these noblemen were also his greatest threat. The contradiction demonstrates the inherent centrifugal tendency of the Turkish court; the best way for Tang to overthrow its Turkish overlord was to wait for opportunities.

⁸⁴ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.68, p.2507; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.89, p.3756.

⁸⁵ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to AD 1757* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), pp.133-136.

Chapter Three: The Means of Incorporating the Northern Turks into the Tang

The fourth year of Zhenguan (630 A.D.) was surely a year worth remembering. Although the Northern Turkish confederacy already had shown signs of disunity, it was this year that Tang could finally take a break. Even though Xieli Khan was still on the run and it would be another month before he surrendered, Li Shimin was already overwhelmed by the news of victory that he made an empire-wide announcement to all his subjects in February and invited them to share his happiness.

Interestingly, in his announcement, the emperor admitted that because of the significant power differential between the Chinese empire and the confederacy when the Turks were strong, the empire was not able to make further attacks on its enemy except holding its ground and let the people recovered from previous chaos. He also claimed that he showed his mercy to the Turks, and therefore their commoners and chiefs were arriving to offer their obedience. The land of barbarians was now in a depression and its central authority neutralized, all without needing to send large armies and talented generals deep into the steppe, as Han dynasty had done⁸⁶. It is obvious that Li Shimin had hit upon a great truth: the confederacy had been corrupted from within, a process in which the Tang had not played a significant role.

⁸⁶ *Ce Fu Yuan Gui*, vol.84, p.987. Edited by Dong Gao 董誥, *Quan Tang Wen* 《全唐文》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1983), vol.5, p.60.

Ultimately, however, Tang did send out troops to crush Xieli Khan, who could no longer count on assistance from the core members of his court.

In the absence of large-scale warfare, both the Chinese and Turkish populations now had time to recover. After Xieli Khan's downfall and the collapse of the confederacy, many Turkish, both elites and commoners, sought protection from Xue-Yantuo, while others, roughly a hundred thousand of them, surrendered to the Tang instead⁸⁷. But Xue-Yantuo remained a potential enemy and source of attraction, and the incorporation and settlement of the surrendered Turks therefore became a "national security" issue. Xue-Yantuo had already demonstrated its independence from Xieli Khan and its ambition to organize a new confederacy. It certainly would not benefit Tang if the empire failed to accommodate the surrendered Turks, who could simply flee and join Xue-Yantuo. On the other hand, even if they did not, a population of one hundred thousand free-floating Turks was a sizeable force and might someday return as enemies. Therefore, Li Shimin and his courtiers had to come up with an effective strategy for settling the Northern Turkish defectors, both elite and commoner.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, economic difficulties and the widespread poverty were significant factors undermining the confederacy. Nourishing the Turkish people, therefore,

⁸⁷ *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6037; *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.193, p.168.

ought to be an immediate concern, but this idea was neither widely accepted nor the only option. In the fourth year of Zhenguan (630 A.D.), the emperor gathered his major courtiers to work out a proper plan. According to the sources, three different plans were presented⁸⁸. The first suggested that all the Turkish defectors should be moved deep into the empire and forced to abandoned nomadic way of life and practice farming. Supporters of the plan asserted that all the Northern Turks should be turned into Han-Chinese, thereby increasing the registered (and taxable) population of the empire. This plan was supported by the majority of the officials, though its primary advocates of the plan are not mentioned. A second plan suggested that the defectors, as barbarians, were untrustworthy and should be sent back to their homeland. This plan was proposed by Wei Zheng, one of Li Shimin's most influential officials. While crueler than the first proposal, it was also highly economical. A third plan proposed that the defectors should be settled in Ordos region and the northern edge of Loess Plateau, which were more friendly to the nomadic way of life, especially horse herding, but could also sustain some agriculture. The idea behind this plan was to nourish the Turks in their own customs and in the hope that they would show their gratitude by helping Tang to defend its borders, or, at the very least, not rebel.

The description of this council is couched in the moral language typical of traditional Chinese

⁸⁸ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.193, p.168; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, pp.6037-6038; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, pp.5162-5163.

historical writing. The main characters all emphasize the differences between the civilized Chinese and uncivilized barbarians, the inevitable negative consequences that come from these differences, and the historical experience, both good and bad, of previous dynasties. And the defenders of the first plan argued that the Turks had surrendered because they had nowhere to flee to, not because they were drawn to the moral charisma of the emperor or to the superior civilization of the Chinese. But behind this Confucianized narration, it is easy to see the importance of strategic considerations for all participants. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the shattering of Sui and the chaos that ensued resulted in a significant loss of the population at large and of the registered population in particular. The emperor was committed to retrieving the Han-Chinese populations that had “leaked away” during the post-Sui chaos, and a majority of the courtiers supported the first plan in recognition of the desperate need to increase the registered population and taxable income of the empire. Whether Turkish defectors cared to be transformed by Chinese civilization or not, they could be put to farming and weaving in any case. The first plan, however, was impracticable. While the additional population certainly would have benefited the empire almost instantaneously, the defectors did, indeed, have another place to go: Xue-Yantuo. And even if they didn’t, the cost and risk of transferring this huge alien population to the counties and prefectures of modern-day Henan, as was proposed – far from their homeland in Mongolia – were too great.

Although the second plan was not supported by the majority of courtiers, it had been proposed by Wei Zheng and backed other by powerful officials, such as Dou Jing 竇靜 and Li Boyao 李百藥. Under this plan, we can also detect the strain of pragmatism under a moralizing veneer. At first, Wei Zheng argued that Turks and Han-Chinese had in fact been enemies for generations, but because they had surrendered, it would be both uncivilized and immoral to eliminate them all. Yet he also thought it would be unwise to take them in, because barbarians were like beasts, they were obedience when weak, but would flee as soon as they had recovered. In the end, though, Wei Zheng also acknowledged practical considerations. The defectors were too many and if they were settled in a nurturing environment, their numbers would increase exponentially and pose a threat to the empire. He pointed out that the ruler of Jin 晉 had to pay a great price for not banishing the barbarians, suggesting that any cost-savings envisioned by Li Shimin in the short run would cost the empire dearly in the long run.

The arguments of Dou Jing and Li Boyao were equally pragmatic. Although Dou Jing did moralize that the Turks could neither be taught by the laws of the sages nor controlled by the laws of the empire, he argued, first, that the Turkish defectors would never forget their homeland, so it would be better to send them home now, and second, that the Turks should be allowed to govern Turks, but that the empire should choose their chiefs and marry them to women of the Chinese court. And according to Li Boyao, the best way to govern the Turks

was to utilize and manipulate the decentralized nature of steppe politics, keeping the power of each chief relatively weak and unable to attack or organize its neighbors. This way peace might be achieved. Dou's pragmatic argument clearly derived from his experience in charge of military affairs at Bing Zhou 并州 (modern-day Taiyuan) during Li Yuan's reign and his familiarity with border politics⁸⁹.

The majority of the courtiers whom we have considered so far shared a strategic and conservative outlook. They all sought to derive actual benefit for the empire from the defectors or spent as least as possible on dealing with them, and these practical considerations took precedence over moral rhetoric. Before we examine Li Shimin's final decision, it's necessary to consider the third plan proposed by Wen Yanbo 溫彥博.

Among all the courtiers, he was the only one who suggested – in language that was as sophisticated and persuasive as Wei Zheng's – that the empire should show mercy to its Turkish defectors. Wen Yanbo, too, couched practical considerations in moralizing language. He claimed that the virtue of the Sage Kings nourished everything between Heaven and Earth, so how could the empire abandon the Turks in their time of need? To do so would be to contradict the Way of Heaven. Also, based on Confucius' idea of "teaching without

⁸⁹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.61, 2369.

classification” (*youjiaowulei* 有教無類), Wen Yanbo argued that if the Tang saved the Turks from extinction by granting them a livelihood and teaching them moral values, they should be willing to serve the empire. Contradicting Wei Zheng’s prediction of the inevitable rebellion of Turks settled within the empire, Wen Yanbo insisted that the Southern Xiong’nu never betrayed the Eastern Han after they had been allowed to settle in Ordos region and that they continued to serve as military allies of the dynasty for many years.

It appears that Wen Yanbo’s position – settling the Turks within the empire – received no support during the debate. Yet, unusually, it was kept in the records, as if it had had great influence on the courtiers, which it didn’t, or alternatively on the emperor, because the emperor later chose to follow Wen’s advice. Yet I would argue that the position taken by Wen Yanbo in the debate was in fact the emperor’s position, a fact we may better appreciate by looking at Wen’s unique role in court politics.

At the time of the debate, Wen Yanbo occupied the office of Prime Minister of the Secretariat (*zhongshuling* 中書令). The Secretariat (*zhongshusheng* 中書省) was one of the Three Departments and Six Ministries (*sanshengliubu* 三省六部) that made up the central government. Although the titles of these central bureaucrats had not been greatly changed since the beginning Tang, their actual powers, duties, and functions within Tang’s realpolitik

shifted from time to time. Generally speaking, in the upper half of the dynasty, the duty of the Secretariat was to put the decisions and ideas of the emperor down on the paper, transforming them into stylish prose. In early Tang, almost all the Prime Minister and Vice Minister of the Secretariat tended to have a close private relationship with the emperor. Some of the famous officials of early Tang who had served as Prime or vice Ministers in the Secretariat - Wen Yanbo and Ma Zhou 馬周 under Li Shimin, Xu Jingzong 許敬宗 and Li Yifu 李義府 under Li Zhi and Wu Zetian - were all blessed by the rulers with extra kindness and generosity⁹⁰. Ironically, accounts of Xu Jingzong and Li Yifu were later put into “The Biographies of the Wicked” (*jianchenzhuan* 姦臣傳) of *Xin Tang Shu* because the editors thought that both had abused the kindness and power granted to them by the emperor, contravening the Confucian ideal of loyal and honest official⁹¹. Yet our sources suggest that at the time they were in fact acting as the ruler’s “black gloves”, allowing the emperor to avoid confronting criticism directly. According to Sun Guodong’s 孫國棟 brilliant study, the position of Prime Minister of the Secretariat – unlike other important central government positions - would be left vacant if the sovereign failed to find the personnel who suited his needs⁹². In contrast to the regulated and routinized processes of the bureaucracy, the relations of the Secretariat and its ministers with the emperor were personal, private and irregular.

⁹⁰ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.74, pp.2612-2619; vol.82, pp.2761-2771.

⁹¹ *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.223, pp.6335-6342.

⁹² Sun Guodong, *Tang Song Shi Luncong* 《唐宋史論叢》 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2010), pp.163-183.

Wen Yanbo had been appointed Vice Minister of the Secretariat by Li Yuan, and later promoted to Prime Minister by Li Shimin⁹³. Surprisingly, when Li Shimin promoted Wen Yanbo, he also ordered him to take charge, concurrently, of the responsibilities of the Vice Minister, which indicates that Wen would have dominated the department. Aside from Wen Yanbo himself, his two brothers, Wen Daya 溫大雅 and Wen Dayou 溫大有, were both confidants of the emperor and enjoy close personal relations with him⁹⁴. Li Yuan and Wen Daya, in fact, were good friends before former's uprising, and Daya also served as Li's private secretary during the military campaign. Wen Daya was the author of *Da Tang Chuang Ye Qi Ju Zhu* 《大唐創業起居注》, a valuable record of the political history of the early Tang. As for Wen Dayou, he was assigned to assist Li Shimin during the campaign and later served along with his brother as private secretary of Li Yuan. In the first year of Wude (618 A.D.), he was appointed as the Vice Minister of the Department of Secretariat.

If we now reconsider the scene in which Wen Yanbo is presenting his opinions and arguing fiercely with other officials, we should not be misled by what is described as his "loneliness." At that particular moment, Wen Yanbo's voice was in fact not his own. It was the emperor's. The voice of the sovereign was always "alone". Therefore, there were only two major plans

⁹³ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.61, pp.2360-2361.

⁹⁴ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.61, pp.2359-2360, p.2362.

offered by the courtiers during the debate, not three. And these two positions recommended by Li Shimin's court officials – either to force the Turkish defectors to become Han-Chinese farmers or simply to get rid of them – were perfectly reasonable solutions given the weakness of the early Tang regime.

Although the disagreement between Wen Yanbo and other officials, especially Wei Zheng, was temporarily put aside once the emperor had made his choice, according to the sources the debate actually went on for years, agreement between the courtiers was never reached, and Wen had to defend the emperor's decision constantly⁹⁵, probably until Wen died in the eleventh year of Zhenguan (637 A.D.). Yet we can see that at least before the thirteenth year of Zhenguan (639 A.D.), the decision to settle the Turkish defectors in Ordos region was never seriously challenged. The emperor's plan was evidently implemented and received no resistance from the Turks, whose interests it obviously satisfied. We know that after the exact locations of the settlements were determined, the original Turkish elites were appointed as the military governor (*dudu* 都督) of these settlements⁹⁶.

Ashina Simo 阿史那思摩, for example, was assigned to govern Xieli Khan's followers, who had made up the core of the old confederacy. The Chinese sources suggest that while both Chuluo

⁹⁵ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.61, p.2361.

⁹⁶ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.109, p.3290; vol.194, p.5163; *Tong Dian*, vol.197, p.5416.

Khan and Shibi Khan appreciate Simo's personality and abilities, Xieli Khan had never trusted Simo with the authority of a large command because of his Iranian looks. Xieli doubted his Turkish (Ashina) pedigree⁹⁷. Here, ethnic bias may have been introduced to explain what had been in fact a political decision, and there are no sources to suggest that such elites bias was prevalent among the rank and file. In fact, according to a recent study, Simo was not only a true descendant of the Turkish royal clan, his own lineage was also one of the noblest within the clan⁹⁸. There therefore appears to have been no reason to question his authority to command troops or even to claim the title of great khan. In any case, it was clear from the perspective of the aristocratic values and political practices of the confederacy, Simo's qualifications for leadership of the defectors were not in doubt. We do not know, however, whether his leadership was welcomed by Turkish commoners. The sources say that after Simo was appointed as great khan by Li Shimin in the thirteenth year of Zhenguan (639 A.D.), he was ordered to lead the defectors back to their original homeland. It is also said that many of the defectors returned to the Ordos Region a few years later because Simo was not an adequate ruler⁹⁹. Yet these records should not be used to argue that Simo was an inappropriate or unwanted choice from a Turkish perspective because his rule was always threatened by Xue-Yantuo and the balance between the two was not in favor of the Turks.

⁹⁷ *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6039; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5163.

⁹⁸ Ai Chong 艾冲, "Tang Taizongchao Tujuezu Guanyuan Ashina Simo Shengping Chutan" <唐太宗朝突厥族官员阿史那思摩生平初探>, *Journal of Further Education of Shannxi Normal University* 《陕西师范大学继续教育学报》(2007), vol.24, No.2, pp.59-63.

⁹⁹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5164.

If the case of Simo's appointment is not decisive proof of Tang's willingness to accommodate Turkish traditions of leadership, then the appointment of Ashina Sunishi 阿史那蘇尼失 can be regarded as another evidence. Unlike Simo, Sunishi was a member of the Turkish royal clan who had his own followers. It was said that he governed his people with generosity and kindness, such that they were willing to follow him to whatever end. When Xieli Khan was abandoned by his people because of his centralizing policies and the economic difficulties of the confederacy, Sunishi and his men were one of those chose to follow their great khan¹⁰⁰. The account of Sunishi is as superficial and ambiguous as that of Simo, but at least we can conclude that in contrast to Xieli Khan, who was detested because of his autocratic rule that reflected his adaptation of Chinese and perhaps Iranian models, Sunishi was respected because of his generosity, and his appointment would have been welcomed by the commoners. We should not forget, too, that Sunishi was the younger brother of Qimin Khan, which means he would have qualified to be a new great khan.

Simo and Sunishi of course were not the only two leaders which were appointed by Tang. As we have mentioned in the previous chapter, Tuli Khan defected to Tang with his subjects before the war against Xieli Khan had officially begun and was ordered by Li Shimin to continue

¹⁰⁰ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.109, p.3290.

to govern his subjects after the war¹⁰¹. We know nothing about Tuli Khan's popularity among the commoners, but apparently, there were no large-scale defections from him. Since Simo, Sunishi and Tuli Khan were given Chinese-style official titles, they fit nicely into the empire's governmental system, but these three appointments also suggest that Turkish customs and traditions of leadership were preserved, and this was an aim of Chinese policy. The only change was the absence of a great khan from the Ashina clan.

In the thirteenth year of Zhenguan, a coup was unleashed by Tuli Khan's younger brother Ashina Jiesheslǔ 阿史那結社率 and his supporters while Li Shimin was traveling to Jiucheng Palace 九成宮¹⁰². Jiesheslǔ was among the Turkish elites traveling with the emperor, and it appears that he wanted to re-found the confederacy by assassinate Li Shimin and establishing Tuli's son, Ashina Heluohu 阿史那賀邏鶻, who had joined the plot under duress, as a new great khan. The coup was a total failure, Jiesheslǔ and his men were killed when they tried to flee, and Heluohu was sent to an exile¹⁰³. The attempted coup resulted in the loss of only a dozen imperial guards and some horses, but it was significant enough for the long opposition

¹⁰¹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5161; *Tong Dian*, vol.197, pp.5412-5413.

¹⁰² The palace was built in the west of modern-day Linyou Xian 麟遊縣, Shaanxi province, near Mount Tiantai 天台山. The distance between the palace and Chang'an was about one hundred and sixty kilometers. Further details about the remains of the palace can be found in *Sui Renshou Gong · Tang Jiucheng Gong – Kaogu Fajue Baogao* 《隋仁壽宮·唐九成宮 – 考古發掘報告》(Edited and composed by Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所; Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe, 2008).

¹⁰³ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.195, p.212; *Tong Dian*, vol.197, p.5413; *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5161; Wang Pu 王溥, *Tang Hui Yao* 《唐會要》(Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1991), vol.94, p.2002; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6039.

to Li Shimin's Turkish policies associated with the majority of the civil bureaucrats to force the emperor to send the Turks away¹⁰⁴. This time, there was no one to speak for the emperor: Wen Yanbo had passed away two years earlier.

From our modern perspective, the courtiers' opinion may seem unreasonable. First of all, the coup involved only about forty men, they were certainly not the majority of the defectors. Second, because these forty men were traveling with the emperor along with Jiesheslü, we must assume that they were all elites, and there is no evidence to suggest that either these elites or their plan had any support among either commoners or other elites. In fact, Jiesheslü is recorded as having been a scoundrel and thoroughly disliked by Tuli Khan, although this judgment may have been a later interpolation. Thirdly, these men didn't receive any help during their escape, which means that the conspiracy had not been widely shared. Stealing horses from the imperial stable, moreover, makes the coup looked more like an improvisational act than a well-organized rebellion. In any case, once Li Shimin had been severely criticized by his officials, the emperor was compelled to admit that his life and the empire had been nearly ruined due to his earlier "disobedience" to Wei Zheng's plan¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁴ *Tang Hui Yao*, vol.94, p.2002; *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.195, p.212.

¹⁰⁵ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.195, p.213; Composed by Wu Jing 吳兢, edited and revised by Xie Baocheng 謝保成, *Zhenguan Zhengyao Jijiao* 《貞觀政要集校》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2003), vol.9, p.500; *Tang Hui Yao*, vol.73, p.1557.

At this point, we might think that the plan to nourish the Northern Turkish defectors and to incorporate them into the empire had been abandoned: Ashina Simo had been appointed as the new great khan and charged with the responsibility of leading the defectors back to their original settlements beyond the Yellow River, a region which now shadowed, and threatened, by Xue-Yantuo. The confrontation between the Turks and Xue-yantuo would be inevitable¹⁰⁶. Yet we recall that when Wen Yanbo had suggested that Tang should demonstrate its benevolence by taking care of the Turks, this involved the practical consideration that the defectors would help to protect the borders by joining Tang military system. It is therefore difficult to believe that the policy of rebuilding a Tang-supported Turkish confederacy and the growth of Xue-Yantuo's power were unrelated events¹⁰⁷. In fact, the source suggests that after Xue-Yantuo learned about the reconstruction of the Turkish confederacy, their khan complained to Li Shimin about the decision and began to prepare his light cavalry to attack the Turks¹⁰⁸. *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* indicates that Turkish forces played an important part in the military conflicts between the Tang and Xue-Yantuo¹⁰⁹, so it's clear that for the Turks, been nourished by Tang had its price. If we go further by examining how frequently did Turkish forces showed up in the military expansions during Li Shimin's reign, it's even clearer that the price was not small at all¹¹⁰. In fact, it's not unreasonable for us to say Tang gained its ability to

¹⁰⁶ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.195, p.213.

¹⁰⁷ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.195, p.208.195.

¹⁰⁸ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.194, p.5164.

¹⁰⁹ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.196, p.227.

¹¹⁰ For example, the Turks paid their military services in battles against Tibetan, Tuyuhun, Xue-Yantuo and Qiuci.

expand only after it had absorbed the defectors of the confederacy.

Having discussed the situation of Turkish commoners, we also need to have a look at how Li Shimin incorporated the Northern Turkish elites who defected to Tang. With the downfall of the confederacy and Xielü Khan's authority, thousands of Turkish elites moved to Chang'an. This must have been a stunning scene, and is described in *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*. The chiefs and leaders who came to the court were all given central military positions (e.g. *Jiangjun* 將軍 or *Zhonglangjiang* 中郎將). Over one hundred Turks received rank five or above, comparable to the number of civil officials with similar ranks at court. The Turkish elites who settled down in Chang'an numbered close to ten thousand households¹¹¹. The figure, which is found in *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* is probably not inaccurate. The *Xin Tang Shu* gives the smaller number (only couple thousands)¹¹², which may indicate that there was a dispute between the original sources used by the two. It is possible that both of the figures were exaggerated since the ratio of the elites who gained rank five or above to the total households doesn't match, or that the total number of households included the households of the non-elites which, in fact, is suggested in *Tang Hui Yao*¹¹³. Or perhaps the figures also include those who were granted ranks lower than five.

Details can be seen in *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.194, p.188; vol.195, p.207; vol.196, p.227; vol.198, p.264 and p.275. Also, although there was no concrete evidence to prove that the Turks joined the Korean campaign in a grand scale, considering that many Turkish elites had paid their services in the campaign, it is very possible that these elites were actually leading Turkish forces.

¹¹¹ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.193, p.170.

¹¹² *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6038.

¹¹³ *Tang Hui Yao*, vol.73, p.1557. There is a difference in the narration between *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* and *Tang Hui Yao*: The former considers that "because of" (*yin'er* 因而) the elites were given central military positions which were

In any case, the descriptions of the military positions granted to the elite Turks and the figure for the number of those gaining rank five or above are the same in these sources. While the numbers are in dispute, all the sources seem to acknowledge the fact that the Turkish elites were welcomed and generally well treated, making it easy for us to identify and discount the literati prejudice which pervades these official sources.

Here it is appropriate to say something about the role of the literati in Tang government. Far too often historians assume that, and write as if, the majority of officials were civil officials, that these made up the largest and most important part of the central government, and that they uniformly detested the Turkish elites, who joined the court, as uncivilized and incorrigible foreigners. Indeed, as we saw in the discussion of what to do about the Turkish commoners, the conservative point of view was no doubt shared by a majority of civil officials. Lai Ruihe 賴瑞和, one of our most brilliant scholars of Tang officialdom and its bureaucratic system, claims that one of the biggest mistakes made by Tang historians has been the assumption that only those who passed the imperial exams qualified as officials¹¹⁴, and that terms like “official” or “courtier” should always be qualified by the term “civil”. Literati writing certainly dominates

rank five and above, the households of the elites which moved into Changan were close to ten thousands, while the latter doesn't emphasize this “cause and effect” relation. Instead, Tang Hui Yao only says that “the tribes are settled in Shuofang, the southern side of the Yellow River, and the households that move into Changan are about ten thousands.” [處其部落於河南朔方之地，入居長安者近萬家。]

¹¹⁴ Lai Ruihe 賴瑞和, *Tangdai Zhongceng Wenguan* 《唐代中層文官》 (Taipei: Linking Publishing Company, 2008), p.523.

extant Tang sources: poetries, stories, private and official histories, and so forth. Most of the biographies of *Jiu Tang Shu* and *Xin Tang Shu* were devoted to civil officials, and according to Lai, most of the extant stone stelae are also attributed to civil officials¹¹⁵. In short, the remaining sources are infused with and overwhelmed by the voice and perspective of the scholar-official. Lai's study also shows, however, that there were over four hundred types of ranked position (also known as "within the stream", or *ruliu* 入流) that made up the central government, including provincial offices, and there were only about one hundred of them which the literati were competent with or willing to serve. Most of the remaining positions required military or technical services, including such things as supervising horse breeding, wine brewing or public construction¹¹⁶, which the literati were incompetent with or unwilling to serve. This "silence majority" actually formed the core allowing the government and empire to function.

Although the Tang government in general was largely formed by non-literati, it would be inappropriate to claim that a civilian-centered government in the Tang the product of literati's imagination. As Lai suggests, literati occupied the central executive positions as well as other of the most respected posts¹¹⁷. And, as we can have seen, literati like Wei Zheng or Xiao Yu

¹¹⁵ Lai Ruihe, *Tangdai Zhongceng Wenguan*, p.526.

¹¹⁶ Lai Ruihe, *Tangdai Zhongceng Wenguan*, pp.523-524, p.526.

¹¹⁷ Lai Ruihe, *Tangdai Zhongceng Wenguan*, p.526.

were among those closest to the sovereign and let their voices be heard. Yet we shouldn't overrate the influence of such civil officials on the emperor because, first, there were fewer of them, and, second, literati generally lacked military skill, knowledge or experience, making it very difficult for them to affect the strategic decisions of the emperor. In some circumstances, literati might hold civil posts within a regiment or during a campaign, but they never actually command troops, drew up battle plans or killed enemies. There were literati who began their careers as civil officials and later became talented generals¹¹⁸, Yet such people were exceptional. As for the technical and supervisory services, Lai also suggests that the literati either lacked the required skills or simply looked down on such roles¹¹⁹. All these deficiencies of the civil officials granted the emperor a lot of room for maneuver, and it was easy enough for him to avoid or ignore their opinions (or, for example by staging a debate in which an official such as Wen Yanbo could represent the preferred imperial position).

Li Shimin's posthumous title was changed four times between 649 A.D. and 754 A.D. In 754 A.D. (the thirteenth year of Tianbao during Li Longji's 李隆基 reign), his posthumous title was finalized as *Great Cultured and Martial Sage, Vast and Brilliant Emperor whose Filiality Extends Widely* (*Wenwu Dasheng Daguangxiao Huangdi* 文武大聖大廣孝皇帝), a title considered by

¹¹⁸ For example, both Lou Shide 婁師德 and Tang Xiuqing 唐休璟 began their careers as civil officials and shifted to military positions later. Details can be found in *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.93, pp.2975-2976 and pp.2978-2980.

¹¹⁹ Lai Ruihe, *Tangdai Zhongceng Wenguan*, p.524.

contemporaries to reflect the virtues and achievements of the second emperor. Yet when Li Shimin passed away in the twenty-third year of Zhenguan (649 A.D.), his posthumous title was simply *Wen Huangdi* 文皇帝, *The Cultured Emperor*. Li Shimin, I believe, would have found this title hilarious, because despite his facility for calligraphy and poetic composition, despite the attempts by his son and courtiers to whitewash his past (still there in the titular phrase *Daguanxiao* 大廣孝), his achievements were all measured on the battlefield.

Li Shimin began his military career by leading troops in the rescue of Yang Guang, emperor of Sui, who had been surrounded by Turkish forces at Yanmen 雁門. After that, from the siege of Luoyang through the attack on Dou Jiande, the attack on Liu Heita 劉黑闥, the Coup of Xuanwu Gate and the Korean campaign, it is not an exaggeration to say that the lives he took and the lives he ordered to be taken far exceeded the number of poetic couplets he would ever compose. Li Shimin was good at war and seldom lost on the battlefield, and the simple moniker “The Martial Emperor” more accurately described his achievements, as it had his father’s¹²⁰, if the repeating of the posthumous titles of the two emperors and the need to cover the brutal side of the founding of a dynasty and the building of an empire was not an issue to consider. In any case, after reviewing all his military success, it will be awkward for us

¹²⁰ Li Yuan was dedicated *Taiwu Huangdi* 太武皇帝, which means *The Grand Martial Emperor* in 635 A.D. as his posthumous title. His title was also changed several times in the following years and, in 754 A.D., his title was changed into *The Devine Augustus Supreme Emperor with Enlightened Filial Piety* (Shenyao Dasheng *Daguanxiao Huangdi* 神堯大聖大光孝皇帝). We can see that the “Martial” part was gone.

to consider that a general-emperor wouldn't praise martial sprite, or simply think that "Wen" was the only sprite that worth to be praised.

According to Gu Jiguang's 谷霽光 study, Li Yuan honored military personnel, the generals and rebel leaders alike whose services and loyalty he needed to consolidate his new dynasty¹²¹. And when we come to Li Shimin's reign, we can not see critical sign of the reduce of such needs since many major expansions happened during that era, not to mention that the emperor himself was an achieved general who understand the value of military officials. Although Li Shimin's considerable military achievements and praise for the martial spirit were significantly toned down if not ignored by official historians, we still can find some, interestingly, some of the traces in the extant sources of conflict between civil officials and this "martial emperor".

The first trace of conflict I will examine is between Liu Rengui 劉仁軌 and Li Shimin¹²². As the source suggests, during a year of Zhenguan, Liu Rengui was serving as the security officer (*xianwei* 縣尉) of Chencang prefecture 陳倉縣. A commander of the regional garrison system (*zhechongduwei* 折衝都尉), Lu Ning 魯寧, was under Liu' supervision, but because his rank was much higher than either the security officer or the magistrate, he was routinely rude and

¹²¹ Gu Jiguang 谷霽光, *Fubing Zhidu Kaoshi* 《府兵制度考釋》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2011), p.123.

¹²² *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.84, p.2789.

violent. Liu warned him for several times, hoping that he might correct his behavior, without success. In the end, Liu ordered Lu to be beaten to death. Because Lu's position was the linchpin of the entire garrison system, his death was reported to the emperor. Infuriated by the report, Li Shimin said: "Who is this security officer who has *my* commander at will?" [是何縣尉，輒殺吾折衝!] He ordered Liu to come to the court immediately and explain. While the civil official¹²³ was simply fulfilling his duties, the emperor was infuriated because the offender was a military official, who was the emperor's personal and loyal servant. Although Li Shimin found the young man to be brilliant and honest, and was forgiven for his "crime" and later promoted to a higher civil post in the central government, the whole story reminds us of the punishment that would have awaited Liu if he had not been such a talented person who fascinated the emperor.

The second trace may be found in what transpired between Li Jing 李靖, a famous general of early Tang, and Li Shimin¹²⁴. According to the sources, Xiao Yu, the Chief of Censorate

¹²³ Some may criticize our argument by saying that the security officers of prefectures were in charge of local security, therefore they were not exactly civil officials. Indeed, according to *Tang Liu Dian* 《唐六典》 {Li Linfu 李林甫, *Tang Liu Dian* 《唐六典》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2014), vol.30, pp.752-753.}, maintaining local security (a semi-military duty) was one of the major duties of the security officers, but *Tang Liu Dian* claims that as the assistant of the magistrate, the security officer also in charge of civil affairs like collecting taxes, pursuing owing taxes, and supervise the subordinates who worked for the magistrate. All these works were filled with paperwork and were knowledge-required. In fact, Liu Rengui was said to be a very knowledgeable person who used to help a courtier to polish his proposal (perhaps serving as his private assistant). Therefore, we should regard the security officer as the very foundation (auxiliary rank 9b to 9a, depend on the size, the population, and the prosperity of the prefecture, which was the lowest rank within the whole system) of the imperial civil bureaucracy.

¹²⁴ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.193, pp.170-171; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.93, p.3814. According to the remaining sources, the story has two versions: Both *ZZTJ* and *XTS* suggest that it was Xiao Yu who reported to Li Shimin that Li Jing allowed his soldiers to sack Xieli Khan's treasure. But according to *Jiu Tang Shu* (vol.67, p.2480), *Da Tang Xin Yu*

(*yushidafu* 御史大夫), impeached Li Jing because, after defeating Xieli Khan, he had allowed his troops to run wild and sack the great khan's treasure-house. Resulting in the disappearance of the entirety of valuable goods of the Northern Turks. Xiao Yu, as the one who was responsible for impeaching officials who violated the law, wanted Li Shimin to send Li Jing to the courts for investigation and punishment. The emperor pardoned Li Jing, and while reprimanding him for his mistake, he also promoted him, granting him a thousand bolts of silk and five hundred households as rewards. The emperor, in fact, contrasted his forgiving nature to the mean emperor Yang Jian, who didn't reward a general for his achievements but executed him for his mistake. Some later, Li Shimin said something even more astonishing to Li Jing: "Now I realize that someone tried to slander you beforehand, hope you wouldn't mind the reproach (that I had to give you)." [前有人讒公，今朕意已寤，公勿以為懷。] After which the emperor gave Li two thousand bolts of silk. Compare with the first story that we examine, Xiao Yu and Li Jing's position was certainly much higher than that of Liu Rengui and Lu Ning's, but in both cases the emperor violated the routine and lawful civil process to protect his men, and even the highest officials in the central government could not object.

《大唐新語》[Composed by Liu Su 劉肅 and revised by Xu Denan 許德楠, *Da Tang Xin Yu* (Beijing Zhonghua Shuju, 1984), vol.7, pp.105-106], and *Ce Fu Yuan Gui* (vol.134, p.1618), it was Wen Yanbo who reported to the emperor. In his *Zi Zhi Tong Jian Kao Yi* 《資治通鑑考異》, Sima Guang suggest that *Jiu Tang Shu* has made a mistake because according to the sources he had, it was the one who served as the Chief of Censorate who made the report. Wen Yanbo was promoted to the Prime Minister of the Department of Secretary in Feb, and the capture of Xieli Khan was in Mar. At that time, Xiao Yu was the one who served as the Chief of Censorate, not Wen Yanbo, therefore Xiao Yu should be the one who made the report. We decide to follow Sima Guang's judgement because as we've discussed previously, Wen Yanbo was privately close to Li Shimin and served as the voice of the sovereign in court, therefore he should have less intention to speak for the civil bureaucrat (although he himself was a civil official) instead of speaking for the emperor.

The third example, similar to the second, occurred between another high-level military official, Hou Junji 侯君集, and Li Shimin¹²⁵. After Hou Junji had captured the city of Gaochang 高昌, he personally sacked the city and forced its inhabitants into slavery. Following his example, his soldiers and officers followed suit. The legal departments in Chang'an somehow got hold of this information and insisted Hou be put in jail. Interestingly, this time Li Shimin followed the advice of the civil officials and put Hou in prison, but Hou was soon released after the Vice Minister of Secretariat, Cen Wenben 岑文本, memorialized the emperor. Here is another case in which a minister of the Secretariat served as the voice of the emperor¹²⁶. In his memorial, Cen claimed that a military official's duty was to defeat enemies, and that victory on the battlefield should be rewarded whether or not they were wild, greedy and ruthless, and that those who lost a war should be punished whether or not they were hard-working and incorruptible. Here, we can see that Cen's voice echoed that of Li Shimin's voice in our second example: in the case of his military officer, the ruler need to be generous and forgiving, putting aside the rules and laws which manipulated (partly at least) by the civil bureaucrats.

Aside from looting the city, we can find the fourth example from Hou Junji's career. Hou has

¹²⁵ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.69, pp.2511-2514.

¹²⁶ *Jiu Tang Shu*, Vol.70, pp.2536-2538. Like Wen Yanbo, Cen Wenben also had close relations with Li Shimin. He was promoted to the Prime minister of Secretariat at around the seventeenth year of Zhenguan (643 A.D.). He was the one who help Li Shimin to arrange all the affairs of Korean campaign and died because of overfatigue.

later put in prison again, this time because he had tried to assist the crown prince Li Chengqian 李承乾 in staging a coup that was meant to preempt the ambition of his younger brother Li Tai 李泰. In prison, Hou was personally investigated by Li Shimin, not by the civil officials as required. The emperor said to the general: “I don’t want you to be insulted by ‘clerks with pens and knives’ (*daobili* 刀筆吏); I have therefore come to question you personally.” [我不欲令刀筆吏辱公，故自鞠驗耳。] “Clerks with pens and knives” points to the civil officials in the courts and it strangely echoes with the Western Han general Li Ling’s 李陵 perspective: in a letter to Su Wu 蘇武¹²⁷, Li Ling said that, after his surrender to the Xiongnu, a surrender over which he had had no control, he would not return to Chang’an with Su because, as a general who devoted his very life to the glory of the empire, he would not endure the inevitable insults of the “clerks with pens and knives”. The disturbing part of the emperor’s allusion is that while Li Ling might say whatever he wanted to about the civil bureaucrats, an emperor was supposed to honor his civil officials. Although the emperor clearly valued Hou Junji’s devotion over the bureaucratic or legal niceties of his civil officials, as he had with Li Jing, Hou Junji’s crime was unforgivable that even Li Shimin indicated to Hou that he intended to give him up by letting him know that every courtier was eager to see him die.

¹²⁷ Edited by Zhang Wenzhi 張文治, *Guoxue Zhiyao* 《國學治要》 (Taipei: Shijie Shuju, 2011), vol.2 of the fifth edition, pp.372-374.

The last example involves Qiu Xinggong 丘行恭 and Li Shimin¹²⁸. In the seventeenth year of Zhenguan (643 A.D.), general Liu Lancheng 劉蘭成 was reported to have rebelled. After Liu's execution, Qiu Xinggong retrieved and consumed his heart and liver. Hearing about this cannibalism, the emperor reproached his general: "Lancheng tried to rebel and the empire has regular punishments to punish him. You don't need to go this far! If [you think that eating the traitor's heart and liver] demonstrates loyalty and filial piety, then the crown prince and kings should be the first to eat, not you!" [蘭成謀反，國有常刑，何至如此！若以為忠孝，則太子諸王先食之矣，豈至卿邪！] Here, Li Shimin's voice is rather interesting since it seems that the emperor was trying to tell his general that the laws and punishments are sufficient, adopting the perspective of the emperor's civil officials. In this case, it appears that Li Shimin was finally acting as an ideal Confucian emperor, who himself submits to laws and regulations, but the emperor does in fact acknowledged Qiu Xinggong's behavior as a way of showing loyalty. The only thing that the emperor seemed unhappy about was that the general had forgotten his position: He should let the crown prince and kings, the emperor's male relatives, enjoy the bounty first. What the emperor was saying was that Qiu Xinggong's behavior existed within the private or personal realm of relations between the ruling house and its trusted generals that were outside the public realm of civil norms, but that in such cases it was up to the emperor to decide whether such actions were appropriate. In this

¹²⁸ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.196, p.234.

particular case, Li Shimin decided that they were not, but all four of the examples discussed above confirm that the relation between the emperor and the military officials who risked their lives for him played out in a realm not subject to the “pens and knives” of civil bureaucrats.

So, what did these complex interactions between Li Shimin, his military officials and civil bureaucrats have to do with the Turkish elites who had shown up on Chang’an’s doorstep?

According to *Tang Liu Dian*, both “The Sixteen Garrisons of the Southern Army” (*nanya Shiliuwei* 南衙十六衛) and “The Left and Right Garrisons of the Northern Army” (*zuoyou Yulinwei* 左右羽林軍衛) were led by *jiangjun* and *zhonglangjiang*¹²⁹. In principle, the Southern Army was controlled by civil bureaucrats and the Northern Army directly and solely by the emperor or crown prince (or later, eunuch). But in reality, the officers, the soldiers, and even the generals of both armies were highly interchangeable¹³⁰, since both armies were tasked with protecting the emperor and his court. Bureaucratic oversight should not be overestimated. The only different between them, as far as we know, is that the Northern Army guarded the Xuanwu Gate, the most strategic position of the palace which geographically close to the emperor’s residence. There would be many attempted coups in the history of

¹²⁹ *Tang Liu Dian*, vol.24 and vol.25, pp.610-653.

¹³⁰ Gu Jiguang, *Fubing Zhidu Kaoshi*, pp.159-160.

Tang in which the one who had gained the support of the Northern Army often succeeded¹³¹.

It was therefore necessary that its commanders should be among the emperor's most trusted generals. Now, many Turkish elites, as we have seen, were granted central military positions of *jiangjun* or *zhonglangjiang*, and many of these now resided in Chang'an. We do not know to which of the two armies they were assigned, but they too owed their loyalty, like their Chinese counterparts in these armies, directly to Li Shimin, and Li Shimin, in turn, expressed his gratitude and generosity to them personally and in private.

We have evidence of his concern for his Turkish officers: Ashina Simo was injured during Korean campaign, Li Shimin personally helped him to clean his wound¹³². Qibi Heli 契苾何力, another leader of a part-Turkish tribe, was also injured during Korean campaign, and Li Shimin provided him with medicine¹³³. Ashina She'er asked for permission of commit suicide after Li Shimin's death so he could serve the emperor in another world¹³⁴. There is no evidence to suggest that Li Shimin treated these Turkish military officers exceptionally well because they were Turkish. Rather we see an emperor who valued military achievements and valor and the personal loyalty of his generals, whether Chinese or Turkish.

¹³¹ Chen Yinke, *Tangdai Zhengzhishi Luegao*, pp.91-104.

¹³² *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.66, p.2465, vol.194, p.5165; *Tong Dian*, vol.197, p.5416; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.215, p.6040.

¹³³ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.198, p.258; *Ce Fu Yuan Gui*, vol.417, p.4971

¹³⁴ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.109, p.3290. *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.110, p.4116.

There is evidence also shows of relations between the Turkish elites in Chang'an and the crown prince, Li Chengqian 李承乾. Once he privately called on some Turks to join him in his palace. A civil official (one of the crown prince's instructors) discovered the secret meeting and sent Chengqian a written remonstrance, describing the Turks he met in his palace as heartless beasts disguised as humans. The crown prince was so angry that he sent out assassins to kill that official¹³⁵. We do not know the identities of this group of Turks, but we do know that one of them was called "Da Ge Zhi" 達哥支. Cen Zhongmian 岑仲勉 suggests that because Li Shimin's elder brother Li Jiancheng 李建成 had a subordinate called "Ke Da Zhi" 可達志, which means "partner" in Turkish, and since "Ke Da" and "Ge Da" was very close in Chinese pronunciation and can be interchangeable when imitating the pronunciations of foreign languages, the recorder or the copiest might mistakenly have written "Ge Da" as "Da Ge", which was a fairly common error in Chinese sources when copying the Chinese imitation of foreign pronunciations¹³⁶. The sources confirm that "Ke Da Zhi" was actually one of the military officers in Li Jiancheng's guard troops - perhaps that was why he was called "partner" - and helped Jiancheng recruit other Turks as his palace-guards¹³⁷. Of course, we cannot be sure that this "Da Ge Zhi" was one of Chengqian's military officers. But we do know that the crown prince obviously valued martial power and military personnel. One of the assassins he had

¹³⁵ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.78, pp.2696-2697; *Ce Fu Yuan Gui*, vol.714, p.8488; *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.196, p.225.

¹³⁶ Cen Zhongmian 岑仲勉, *Tujue Jishi* 《突厥集史》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1958), pp.223-224.

¹³⁷ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.191, p.115; *Xin Tang Shu*, vol.79, p.3542.

sent out, for example, was one of his guards, Hegan Chengji 紇干承基¹³⁸. This man had been appointed by Li Shimin as a commander of the regional garrison system in Youchuan 祐川 after Chengqian lost his position and prestige¹³⁹, which shows that he possessed military talent. Apparently, Chengji was not the only guard that served the crown prince by doing his “dirty work”. Feng Shijin 封師進, another mid-ranking officer in Chengqian’s palace guard, also served as another of the crown prince’s assassins¹⁴⁰. Sadly, we have no more information about Feng Shijin, Hegan Chengji, Lu Ning, and the many other middle-ranking military officers who probably had close ties to the imperial family. There was also Hou Junji, of course, who assisted the crown prince in his coup attempt and was ultimately executed for rebellion along with Li Anyan 李安儼, a *zhonglangjiang* of the Southern Army¹⁴¹. Li Chengqian also aspired to be himself a “She” under Ashina Simo’s command¹⁴², an aspiration which was completely unacceptable and which deeply offended the civil officials not only because “She” was in charge of leading large-scale troops, but also because it was a Turkish position. More importantly, the speaker was the crown prince, the will-be-emperor. Li Shimin’s another son Li Tai 李泰 had much better relations with the civil officials, many of whom were willing to serve as scholars in his palace¹⁴³. Li Tai never hid his ambition to replace his brother and he

¹³⁸ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.196, p.225.

¹³⁹ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.197, p.240.

¹⁴⁰ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.76, p.2649.

¹⁴¹ *Jiu Tang Shu*, vol.76, p.2649.

¹⁴² *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.196, p.238.

¹⁴³ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.196, p.228.

had the support of the civil bureaucrats because unlike the crown prince, he was obviously less martial and more compliant than his brother or father. The sources therefore suggest that Chengqian loved to mingle with the “wretched”, and that he hate to be instructed by courtiers, yet we know that many of those whom the historians call wretched were in fact military officers, whether Turkish or Chinese. The civil official who had remonstrated against Chengqian for cavorting with Turks was actually criticizing Chengqian’s ideal of a general-emperor which he had inherited from his father, and it was this that probably so offended him and prompted him to have the official killed.

We have seen that military values were definitely praised by Li Shimin in the early Tang, and that the military officials enjoyed special relation with the emperor. This relation was not regulated by the civil officials and the law, and constituted what we will call the inner court based on personal relations with the emperor. In other words, Li Shimin’s court was highly militant, although he was still made a show of his willingness to work with the literati, even producing literati works himself, or at least not to overly drift away from them in public, unlike his first-born. The elites of the Turkish defectors were recruited into the military system and served as the emperor’s generals, therefore we can observe them in an “emperor-military officials” context. In this context, the relations between the Turkish elites and the emperor were personal and such relations are confirmed even in the breach: Ashina Jiesheslü’s betrayal

was a consequence of his personal dissatisfaction with Li Shimin and the emperor's failure to grant him additional favors¹⁴⁴. And Li Shimin acknowledged that Jiesheslū's rebellion was a personal betrayal of the emperor and had nothing to do with his ethnic identity. After the rebel, Turkish elites of the defectors were still trusted by the emperor¹⁴⁵.

Finally, we might consider whether the means used by Li Shimin to incorporate the Turkish elites was compatible with the Turkish political cultural. Some scholars consider that Li Shimin was trying to keep the Turkish elites under his control, and that he appointed Turkish elites as his central military officers settled them in Chang'an in order to keep them away from Turkish commoners, the foundation of their original power¹⁴⁶. There is no evidence to decide this question one way or another, but studies have shown that the rulers of the Inner Asian regimes constructed their power around the personal loyalty of their royal guards¹⁴⁷. There seems to be little difference between this and Li Shimin's relation with his military officers, whether Turkish or not. In the person of Li Shimin, Chinese and Turkish political culture seems to have overlapped, and the rebellion of a Turkish officer such as Jiesheslū was little different from the rebellion of a Chinese officer like Liu Lancheng, although we have little information

¹⁴⁴ *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, vol.195, p.212; *Tang Hui Yao*, vol.94, p.2002.

¹⁴⁵ Zhu Zhenhong 朱振宏, "Lun Zhenguan Shisannian (639) 'Jiuchenggong Shijian' jiqi Yingxiang" <論貞觀十三年(639)「九成宮事件」及其影響>, *Taiwan Shida Lishi Xuebao* 《台灣師大歷史學報》(2010), vol.43, pp.79-80.

¹⁴⁶ Zhang Qun 章群, *Tangdai Fanjiang Yanjiu* 《唐代蕃將研究》(Taipei: Linking Publishing Company, 1990), pp.97-102; Wu Yugui 吳玉貴, *Tujue Hanguo yu Suitang Guanxishi Yanjiu* 《突厥汗國與隋唐關係史研究》(Beijing: Zhongguo Shehuikexue Chubanshe, 1998), pp.240-241.

¹⁴⁷ Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors*, p.77-78.

about the latter. The behavior of the crown prince, moreover, was quite similar to the behavior of the sons of Turkish khans, although he probably thought that he was only imitating his father.

Conclusion:

After the collapse of Sui dynasty, the Northern Turkish confederacy became the dominant power in the Northeast Asian hinterland. Through their support of different political powers in north China, the confederacy was able to directly influence the political evolution of the region and the new Chinese order which would emerge there in the late-sixth and early-seventh centuries. The confederacy, however, had little interest in allying with, or taking over, other regions of China, and this self-limitation placed the incipient Tang regime between the confederacy and the other north Chinese political powers and required the Tang founder to be both practical and flexible politically but also culturally.

After Tang gradually defeated these competitors and reclaimed the former territories of Sui, the confederacy in fact strengthened its power by launching frequent attacks. These attacks were so deadly that Li Yuan considered moving the capital away from Chang'an. The confederacy also threatened the Tang by holding on to its Han-Chinese refugees. Repatriating them became a necessity for rebuilding the empire and the economy. Unfortunately, their return only occurred after the fall of the confederacy. At the start of the Tang, the regime was weak both within and without, and a full-scale attack on the confederacy was impossible.

Although the confederacy had military superiority, its inner instabilities should lead itself to its doom. After Xieli Khan became the great khan, he violated the original political practice of the confederacy by trusting and relying on Han-Chinese and Sogdian-Irian advisors, provoking dissatisfaction among both his elite and non-elite subordinates. The economic difficulties, caused by heavy snow and cold winters, undermined the livelihood of commoners on the steppe. The effect of elite dissatisfaction and commoner immiseration undermined Xieli Khan's authority in general and provoked rebellion among the other steppe powers that were subordinate to the confederacy, and also contributed to a succession crisis in which Xieli Khan could no longer trust his closest kin. The centrifugal forces within the Ashina clan itself could not be contained. Tang did not play a significant role in abetting or encouraging these forces, but it did take advantage of the irreparable internal conflicts which doomed the confederacy. But Li Shimin would not have gained such glory if the power of the confederacy were not shrinking.

After the collapse of the confederacy, about ten thousand Turks defected to the Tang, Tang had to come up with a solution that would both benefit the empire and please the defectors. There were always other powers in the East Asian hinterland to which the Turkish defectors could turn – to the ultimate detriment of the empire. As an experienced general, Li Shimin surely knew the military potential of Turkish light cavalry. Therefore he settled the majority of

Turkish commoners in the Ordos region and the northern edge of Loess Plateau, a vast borderland where the Turks could pursue their original livelihood and paid their military services when needed. Qualified Turkish elites were also appointed to be the leaders of these defectors, so that Turkish political practices would continue. If Li Shimin had followed the advice of the majority of his civil bureaucrats, transferring the Turks to the heartland of China and forcing them to practice farming, they and their descendants would have lost their military traditions and effectiveness. Or, if Wei Zheng's advice was the plan to be followed, Tang would also lose the chance to gain the Turkish military power. Meanwhile, to incorporate the Turkish elites, Li Shimin granted them military official positions and honored them with the same personal attention he gave to his loyal Chinese generals, immunizing them from both civil bureaucratic oversight and the political tensions and conflict between military and civil officials at court. From the perspective of the Turkish elites, the personal relation between themselves and Li Shimin shared the same character of the relation between a Turkish khan and his subordinate: the former needed to be generous, caring and brave, while the latter would for pay this charisma with loyalty. With the loyalty of and service of the defectors, Tang had gained a critical victory within the grand process of incorporating the Turkish power.

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